

INSIDE: LEARNING TO LOVE MY BIGHORN EWE TAG

Montana Outdoors

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SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2009

ANOTHER HUNTER IN THE WOODS

How are wolves affecting
deer and elk populations?

FARMING FOR PHEASANTS

DECIPHERING LAND MAP LANGUAGE

BEHIND THE SCENES AT HUNTER CHECK STATIONS



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Montana Outdoors

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2009

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FRONT COVER Are wolves driving down the population of northwestern Montana whitetails? See page 8. Photo by Donald M. Jones.

Not destiny

The article "Precious Metals Precious Trout" (May-June) evoked the ire of many in the mining industry. We Montanans (avid hunters, fishermen, and recreationists) believe our love and respect for Montana's environment and our call to mine its abundant resources are not mutually exclusive. The Mining Law of 1872 is one of 35-plus laws regulating how we do business in Montana. As a former state senator from Butte, I lived the legislative years of transforming inadequate bonding to one of certainty for mining reclamation. In 2007 the mining industry, with the Department of Environmental Quality, led the charge to revise the Montana Metal Mine Reclamation Law, providing for temporary bonding in unanticipated circumstances. As an industry, we have worked on conservation projects to advance spawning and wildlife water improvement, and have donated to Trout Unlimited for such projects. Barrett Minerals received the American Fisheries Society (Montana Chapter) Industry Award for their efforts to preserve and enhance habitat for the westslope cutthroat trout.

Over the last decades we have worked to eliminate obstacles that vilify the hard work of the mining community and erode a working relationship with agencies such as FWP. In that endeavor we believe we have been successful. I speak for hundreds of members within our association to encourage your support of our work together. It is not destiny that we are adversaries. Together we can offer Montanans the best of all worlds.

DEBBIE SHEA
Executive Director
Montana Mining Association



Chagrined

As a longtime, avid whitewater canoeist, kayaker, and rafter, I was glad to see the article in the July-August issue ("A Turn for the Worse") reporting on and analyzing the many fatal accidents that occurred on Montana waters in 2008. It was clear that in many, if not most, of these accidents, someone died because he or she was not wearing a life jacket. Anyone who recreates on Montana's rivers will see a whole lot of folks whose life jackets are not on or are not properly fastened, despite repeated warnings from FWP, county search and rescue officials, sheriffs, and others. I don't know what should be done to get people to wear life jackets, but one thing is clear: Setting a good example can only help, and that should apply to *Montana Outdoors* especially. It was therefore with chagrin that I looked at the photograph on page 21 in the same issue of a couple kayaking on Frenchtown Pond—without life jackets. Of course, the pond is not a threatening body of water, but then again, that's probably what the 14 people who died last year thought when they set out on what was supposed to be a wonderful trip.

DICK BARRETT
Missoula

While reading the article on water safety, one of the incidents struck home. I remember the female who died in the storm on the Tongue River Reservoir last year. I

work for the local sheriff's office and was called to the incident. Another person who lost his life in that storm was preparing to load his boat when the wind blew it away from him. He went in to get it and drowned in the storm. I was present when both bodies were recovered. In the last week we have had three boats go down on the Bighorn River. All occupants were recovered safely, but several were not wearing PFDs (life vests), even though the river is running high and fast. That's dangerous. Recreationists need to wear their PFDs and keep an eye on the weather at all times. Please be careful when out on the water.

R. KRUGER
Hardin

Proud dad

My son Griff participated in Montana's Youth-Only Special Pheasant Weekend last year after he took his hunter safety course. He obtained his first hunting license, available free to all youth who successfully pass the hunter safety course. We headed north of Great Falls on a cool, overcast day with very little wind. We started the hunt along a farm-pond drainage. At the end of our push, the dogs flushed a mature rooster. Griff dropped the bird cleanly with his second shot. An

hour later, the younger dog locked on point. A rooster flushed to the left, and Griff took it with a clean passing shot. Before lunch, we saw a bird fly into a fence row. Luckily, the rooster stayed put, and both dogs held the bird until Griff could get into position. He dropped his third bird with his second shot. All told, Griff shot an opening-day limit of pheasants with five shells. Talk about a proud dad.

It is my understanding that FWP sponsors these and other youth-only hunts to foster the hunting ethic in our children. To that end, I would call your department's youth pheasant weekend a terrific success. It was so nice for Griff and me to spend a day afield a week before the general pheasant opener. Because I did not carry a gun, I could devote all of my attention to my son and the dogs, ensuring a safe and enjoyable hunt. We'd both like to thank FWP for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

BRIAN J. MALLOY, MD
Great Falls

Correction The article "Precious Metals Precious Trout," (May-June) misidentified a state agency that collects and publishes information on Montana geology. It is the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, not Bureau of Mines and Technology.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

It's common knowledge that groups representing landowners and those representing hunters disagree over some issues, especially public access to private land. One side justly asserts landowners' legal rights to control access to their private property, while the other side justly defends hunters' legal rights to pursue wildlife, which is held in the public trust by the state but is often found on private land.

What's less well known, or at least acknowledged, is how often the landowners and hunters themselves cooperate for the common good. Since the state's inception, landowners have provided wildlife habitat on their property and allowed public access, while hunters have hunted on private property with courtesy and gratitude.

From this tradition of cooperation and respect have grown Montana's valuable hunting culture and heritage as well as wildlife populations that are the envy of most other states.

One of the most successful efforts to help strengthen bonds between hunters and landowners was the establishment in 1993 of the Private Land/Public Wildlife Council (PL/PW). Appointed by the governor, this board of citizens representing the interests of hunters, landowners, and outfitters is charged with, among other goals, increasing public hunting access and helping landowners who allow public access. Out of the PL/PW came Montana's nationally acclaimed Block Management Program, which each year opens up more than 8 million acres of private and isolated public land.

Despite these achievements, conflicts remain between hunters and landowners. Often those disagreements stem from one side not empathizing with or even understanding the other's point of view. The misperceptions weaken relations between hunters and landowners. That, in turn, threatens Montana's hunting heritage, public

access, public support for landowner issues, and the ability of FWP to manage wildlife populations using public hunting on private land.

To improve understanding between hunters and landowners, FWP—at the urging of the PL/PW—has started the Hunting Heritage Stewardship Project. The project aims to build stronger relationships and trust between hunters and landowners, and ultimately increase opportunities for the public to participate in safe, legal, and responsible hunting on private property. At the project's core is an interactive website where hunters and landowners can learn about and better understand the common values of and different perspectives held by hunters and landowners; learn which behaviors are most likely

to build trusting relationships and lead to public access; and discover new ways to foster stronger relations among hunters, ranchers, farmers, and other property owners.

One part of the project now being developed is modeled after FWP's popular Bear Identification website. The new site would allow participants to work their way through a series of challenges while learning about wildlife conservation, land stewardship, and more. Future issues of *Montana Outdoors* will monitor the project's progress.

One of the many things Montana landowners and hunters agree on is that they are fortunate to live in a state with a strong hunting heritage and tradition of wildlife stewardship. That's a large part of what makes Montana, well, Montana. FWP is doing all we can to strengthen the ties that bind this department, hunters, and landowners so we can keep it that way.

—JOE MAURIER, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*



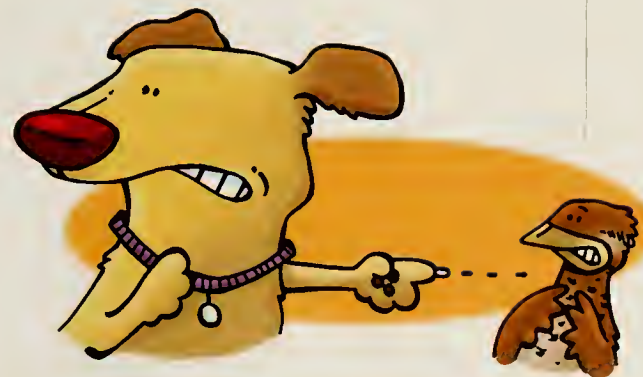
DONALD M. JONES

NATURAL WONDERS

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER GROSSHAUSER

Q. *I'm confused about all the different types of hunting dogs out there.*

A. There are two main categories of hunting dogs. Retrievers (mainly Labradors, Chesapeakes, and goldens) are big, strong dogs with thick, oily coats that withstand cold water. They are trained to sit until a duck or pheasant has been shot and then retrieve the bird. Pointers (mainly English setters, German wirehairs, English pointers, and Brittannies) are taught to run back and forth through a field and aim their muzzle at a hiding bird. The hunter walks up and signals the dog to flush the prey into the air for a shot. Some pointers also retrieve, but that is not their specialty. A third, smaller category is the flushers, which are trained to move through thick cover and force hiding birds into flying and then retrieve the kill. English springer spaniels are the most common breed in this category. Labradors and goldens also work well as flushers.



Biting the Bullet

New studies show that hunter-harvested venison may contain more lead particles than previously thought.

Last hunting season, state officials in North Dakota and Minnesota warned hunters and their families that consuming venison may cause lead poisoning due to bullet fragments in the meat. The warnings came after a North Dakota physician found lead in ground venison donated to several food banks.

Should Montanans be concerned about bullets in their backstraps? Probably not, says state medical officer Dr. Steven Helgersen. Though "there's no known benefit to humans from ingesting lead," he says, "ingestion of venison has not been associated with either elevated blood lead levels or adverse human health effects."

Nevertheless, some states aren't taking any chances. In 2008, after testing the extent of lead contamination in venison donated to food banks, North Dakota recommended that food donation centers cease distributing venison. After running several tests, Minnesota has decided to restrict food bank venison donations to whole cuts only. Wisconsin has cautioned food pantries to withhold venison distribution, and several other states also have issued consumption warnings.

Last winter, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources conducted a bullet fragmentation test on sheep carcasses, which are anatomically similar to white-tailed deer.

Testers used five types of rifle bullets, two types of muzzle-loader bullets, and one shotgun slug. Using X-rays and CT scans, they found that bullets fragmented within the carcasses more and at a greater distance from the exit wound than was commonly assumed. Some fragments ended up as far as 14 inches from the exit wound. Fragmentation from ballistic lead-tip bullets was far greater than from shotgun slugs and muzzleloader bullets. Copper-bonded lead and solid copper bullets had no fragmentation. Shots in the hindquarters caused far more fragmentation than heart-lung shots.

Lead contamination in ground meat is far greater than in whole cuts. Commercial game processors sometimes run

venison in batches through meat grinders, where soft lead ground up in one batch can contaminate another. Likewise, hunters who process venison at home may unknowingly grind up lead particles that spread throughout the ground meat.

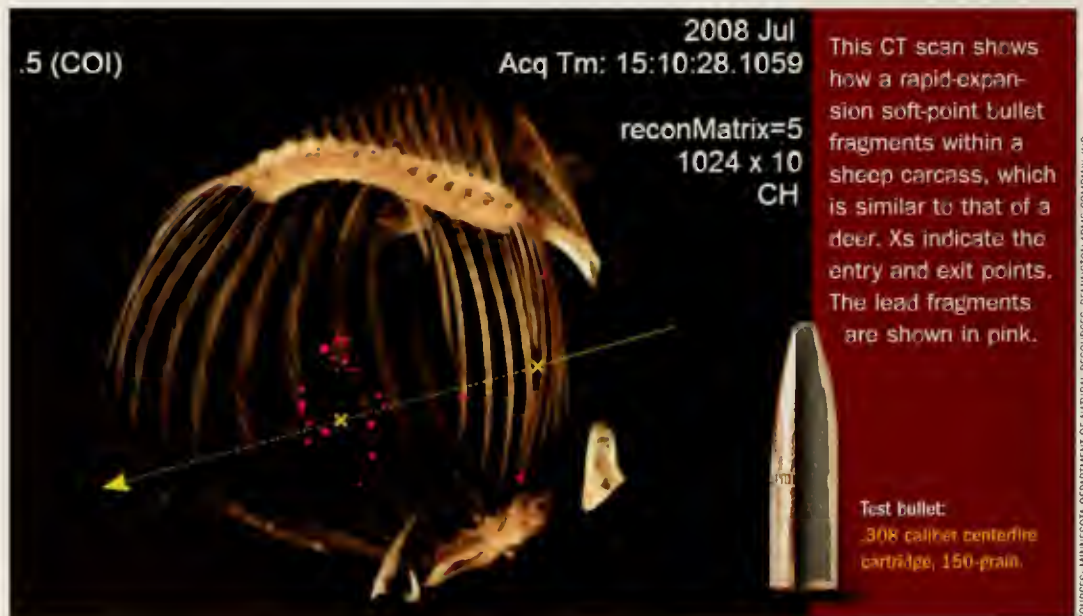
No one is sure how much lead a human can safely ingest. Hunters have been eating animals killed with lead for centuries with few ill effects. Bird hunters commonly swallow lead pellets when eating their kill, and ingesting minute amounts of lead fragments from game at least once in a while is probably unavoidable for those whose diets are rich in wild meat. So far, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has documented no lead poisoning from ingesting bullet fragments in game meat. And no illnesses have been linked to consuming lead particles in venison harvested by hunters.

However, Helgersen adds, lead can impair mental or physical growth in a developing fetus and in young children. And lead can harm human bodies and

brains at levels that cause no noticeable symptoms. Women of child-bearing age and children should consider avoiding meat harvested with lead bullets. Helgersen adds that the danger of children ingesting lead from paint in older homes is much greater than the danger of lead contamination in venison, donated or otherwise.

Montana's official position, says Helgersen, is that caution is certainly warranted, but any regulation prohibiting the distribution of venison is premature. "There's sufficient reason for concern," he says. "But we don't believe there is sufficient evidence to restrict access to venison harvested with lead bullets and donated to Montana food pantries."

Though the chance of lead contamination from venison is minimal, it may still be a good idea to trim away a substantial portion of the meat from around the bullet channel. Another option, though an expensive one, is to use solid copper bullets, which produce no lead contamination.





Beef v. venison taste controversy finally ends

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This press release, from the "United States Venison Council," has been circulating on the Internet for several years. It was originally written by Don Drost, at the time a University of Wisconsin county extension agent in Barron, Wisconsin.*

Controversy has long raged about the relative quality and taste of venison and beef as gourmet foods. Some people say that venison is tough, with a strong "wild" taste. Others insist that venison's flavor is delicate.

An independent food research group was retained by the Venison Council to conduct a taste test to determine the truth of these conflicting assertions once and for all.

First a grand champion steer was chased into a swamp a mile and a half from a road and shot several times. After the entrails were removed, the carcass was dragged back over rocks and logs and through mud and dust to the road. It was then thrown into the back of a pickup truck and driven through rain and snow for 100 miles before being hung out in the sun for several days.

After that it was lugged into a garage, where it was skinned and rolled around on the floor. Strict sanitary precautions were observed throughout the test, with in the limitations of the butchering environment. For instance, dogs and cats were allowed to sniff and lick the steer carcass, but were chased away when they attempted to bite chunks out of it.

Next a sheet of plywood left from last year's butchering was set up in the basement on two sawhorses. Dried blood, hair, and fat left from last year were scraped off with a wire brush previously used to clean out the grass stuck under the lawn mower.

The skinned carcass was then dragged down the steps into the basement, where a half-dozen inexperienced but enthusiastic men worked on it with meat saws, cleavers, and dull knives. The result was 375 pounds of soup bones, four bushel baskets of meat scraps, and a couple of steaks that were 1/8 inch thick on one edge and 1 1/2 inches thick on the other.

The steaks were seared on a glowing red-hot cast iron skillet to lock in the flavor. When the smoke cleared, rancid bacon grease was added along with three pounds of onions, and the whole conglomeration was fried for two hours.

The meat was gently teased

from the frying pan and served to three blindfolded taste panel volunteers. Each panel member thought it was venison. One said it tasted exactly like the venison he had eaten in hunting camps for the previous 27 years.

The results of this scientific test show conclusively that there is no difference between the taste of beef and venison.

Fall is a great time to visit parks

The crowds are down and so is the temperature, making fall a great time to visit Montana state parks, says Ken Soderberg, chief of the FWP Parks Division Interpretive Services Bureau. State parks along water, such as Brush Lake, Tongue River, Flathead Lake, and Missouri Headwaters, are especially beautiful as the leaves of cottonwoods and other deciduous trees turn. Parks that can be scorching hot in midsummer, such as Makoshika and Lewis and Clark Caverns, cool down in October, making it easier to hike their scenic trails in midday. "Now that the vacation crowds are gone for the season, families can feel like

they've got some parks all to themselves," says Soderberg.

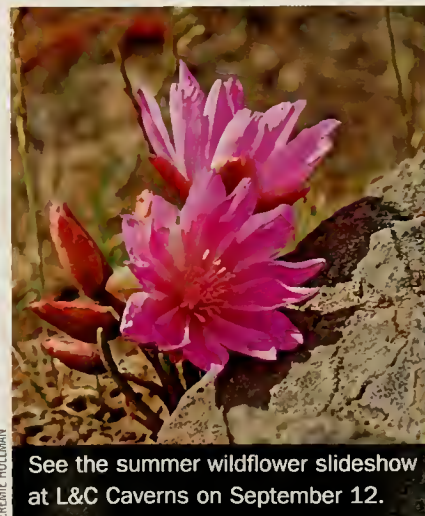
Among the fall events this year: mammoth hunting (9/4-6) and atlatl competition (9/18-20) at First Peoples Buffalo Jump, Chief Plenty Coups Day of Honor at Chief Plenty Coups (9/6), campfire crooning at Bannack (9/6), wildflower slide-show at Lewis & Clark Caverns (9/12), and Halloween at Pictograph Caves (10/31).

To learn more about these and other activities at state parks this fall, visit fwp.mt.gov/parks.

Phone in a game violation this fall

Poachers steal wildlife from everyone, and gun-toting trespassers and other lawbreakers tarnish the image of hunters in the eyes of landowners and non-hunters, says Brian Shinn, coordinator of the FWP TIP-Mont Program. Shinn says people can help game wardens reduce game law violations by calling the TIP-Mont hotline. Last year 1,900 people reported violations including exceeding bag limits, night hunting, wasting game, and loaning or transferring tags.

Callers may remain anonymous and may be eligible for a cash reward when tips result in convictions. "A lot of hunters now have the TIP-Mont number programmed into their cell phone on speed dial so if they see someone poaching or breaking other laws they can call the hotline from the field," says Shinn. The number is 1-800-847-6668 (1-800-TIP-MONT). 🐾



See the summer wildflower slideshow at L&C Caverns on September 12.

JEROME HOLLMAN





"I like to show the higness of Montana and how enormous everything here is," says photographer **Dušan Smetana** of Bozeman. Smetana shot this scene at a spring creek in Paradise Valley last fall on a cool October day. "A storm had just passed across the Absarokas in the background, and I liked the clouds and the colors in the cottonwoods along the Yellowstone River," he says. Smetana asked the angler, a friend, to pose in a red shirt. "You need a bright color in a shot like this to attract your eye, and red is a great accent. That contrast of having a bright color is so important to me. I think of brown trout, when they are spawning in the fall, and how they have those bright red spots on their golden sides. I don't know. Maybe I was trying to capture some of that with this shot." ■



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ANOTHER MOUTH TO FEED

Hunters in western Montana are feeling the pinch as the growing wolf population takes a bite into deer and elk numbers. BY TOM DICKSON

Last hunting season was Damon Almond's worst in the 13 years he has lived in western Montana. The Missoula-area firefighter hunted 21 days during the bow and rifle seasons and failed to see, much less kill, a single elk. "A lot of times I get an elk with my bow, and if not, then usually during the rifle season," he says. "Last year I tried all my areas"—up and down the Bitterroot and Sapphire ranges, south of Missoula, and in the Seeley Lake area—"and never even saw an elk. But I saw wolves or wolf sign every place I hunted. I'm

not a biologist, and I know I don't have all the answers, but what I experienced proves to me the issue is wolves."

Almond isn't the only one concerned that western Montana's growing wolf population may be reducing deer and elk numbers. In February, dozens of hunters gathered in front of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional office in Kalispell to protest the prolonged delay of Montana assuming management over gray wolves. "Feds and Wolves, out of control," read one placard. "Wolves are now the top concern I hear about from

hunters around here,” says Craig Jourdonnais, FWP wildlife biologist in the Bitterroot Valley. In the Gardiner area, hunters have for years denounced the federal reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park, predicting lower elk populations and fewer hunting opportunities throughout the area.

Are wolves killing elk and deer and affecting hunting opportunities in parts of Montana? Definitely, say FWP biologists. But wolves are by no means the only factor driving prey populations and hunting success. What’s more, FWP is committed to maintaining wolves on the landscape. That puts the department in the challenging position of trying to work out a fair and sustainable balance for both wild ungulate and large carnivore populations.

RAPID RECOVERY

Wolves are native to Montana and were commonly seen by early explorers. Market hunting nearly eliminated wolves’ natural foods—bison, deer, and elk—in the late 19th century, so the carnivores began preying on sheep and cattle. In response, homesteaders and government agencies poisoned, trapped, and shot wolves under a bounty system. By the 1930s, wolves had been eliminated from Montana. Under protection of the 1973 Endangered Species Act, the carnivores began naturally recolonizing

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.



HOWLING MAD Hunters from across northwestern Montana gathered in Kalispell last winter to protest continued federal control over wolves that they fear are wiping out deer populations.

Glacier National Park from British Columbia. By the 1980s, two packs lived in the North Fork of the Flathead River drainage. In the mid-1990s, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) released 66 wolves into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho to hasten the pace of wolf recovery. Wolves have since spread south from Glacier, north and northwest from Yellowstone, and east from Idaho, filling in available habitat. Wolf restoration has succeeded faster than anyone expected. Montana’s population has been growing at what FWP biologists call a “robust” rate, increasing in size from 70 individual wolves in 1996 to a minimum estimate of 497 at the end of 2008. In March 2009, the

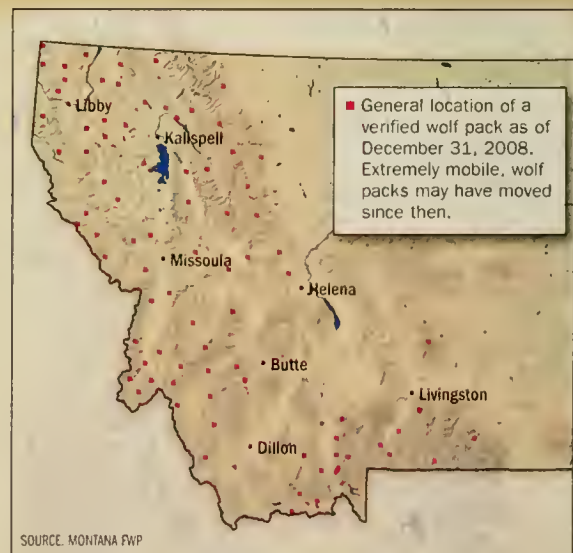
USFWS delisted the Rocky Mountain gray wolf in Montana and Idaho, giving those states full management authority.

No one argues that wolves hunt, kill, and eat deer and elk to survive. Studies in northern Minnesota and southeastern Alaska estimate a wolf kills 19 to 24 deer per year. One Minnesota study found wolves kill roughly 6 percent of the whitetail population where the two species coexist. “Combined with severe winters, habitat degradation, and hunter harvest, wolves definitely can contribute to locally declining whitetail populations, especially in areas that already have low deer densities,” says Dan Stark, wolf coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, which keeps tabs on that state’s 3,000 wolves. Ken Hamlin, recently retired FWP wildlife research biologist in Bozeman, estimates each wolf in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) kills from 11 to 35 elk annually, depending on winter conditions and pack size. Studies conducted in the GYE over the past decade by FWP, Montana State University (MSU), and federal agencies found that in areas containing high densities of wolves—such as the upper Gallatin Canyon, Madison River headwaters in Yellowstone National Park, and the park’s northern winter range—the carnivores made significant inroads into elk populations, killing up to 20 percent in some areas. “Where you had a high ratio of wolves per 1,000 elk, we found decreased elk calf recruitment and population declines,” says

Montana’s statewide wolf pack distribution



By the 1930s, wolves had been eliminated from all of Montana. Packs from Canada moved into the Glacier National Park area in the 1980s, grew, and spread south. Packs from federal reintroductions in the mid-1990s have spread north and northwest from Yellowstone National Park and east from Idaho. The latest minimum count (December 2008) is 497 wolves in 84 verified packs scattered across Montana’s western third. Run-ins with livestock have slowed eastward expansion.



“We’re hearing loud and clear the concerns of hunters seeing more wolves and tracks.”

Hamlin, who led the FWP studies. (Recruitment is the percentage of young elk that survive their first year and add to the population, usually measured as the number of calves per 100 cows counted at winter’s end.) The most well known example is the large elk herd in northern Yellowstone National Park, which has dropped from a record high of 19,000 in the mid-1990s to 7,000 today. (High hunter cow elk harvest throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s contributed to that decrease).

Wolves also may contribute to localized ungulate declines elsewhere in Montana. In northwestern Montana, where regional wildlife manager Jim Williams says the number of wolf packs has more than doubled in recent years, whitetail harvest this past fall dropped 18 percent. “We’re hearing loud and clear the concerns of hunters seeing more wolves and tracks,” he says. Mike Thompson, FWP regional wildlife manager in Missoula, says that in the Bitterroot, calf recruitment this past spring dropped sharply

to a record low. He is concerned that some isolated elk populations, such as those in portions of Mineral and Ravalli counties, may not rebound to historic averages. “We have to be open to the possibility that wolves could prevent recovery in some areas—even if we end antlerless elk harvest, which we’ve had to do in some hunting districts,” he says.

Though the effects vary widely, wolves can indeed make it harder for hunters.

Research in the GYE found that elk grow more vigilant with wolves nearby and in some areas spend less time in the open. Biologists also know that wolves move deer and elk short distances and keep prey moving more often. “Elk are smart, and in places they’ve learned to timber up more than they were and not come out as much in early morning and late evening,” says Hamlin. “Hunters may have to learn how wolves affect elk behavior where they hunt and use that to their advantage.” What’s more, the addition of wolves to other factors affecting deer and elk numbers—such as weather,

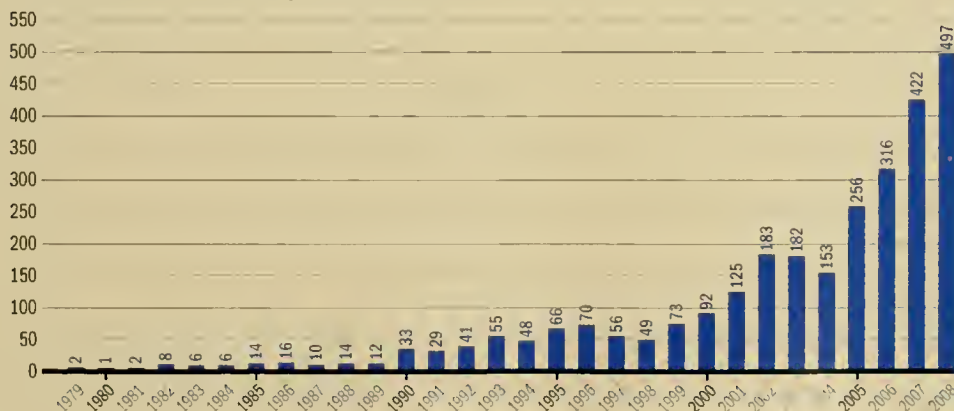


KRISTI DUBOIS, MONTANA FWP

LICKED? Studies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem show that a wolf will kill 11 to 35 elk each year, depending on winter conditions and pack size. In isolated areas, that has equaled up to 20 percent of the elk population in some years.

Statewide wolf population 1979–2008

Wolf numbers in Montana began a rapid increase following the reintroduction of 66 wolves in the mid-1990s by the USFWS in Idaho and Yellowstone National Park.



JUDY WANTULOK

VENISON EATERS Wolves aren't the only carnivores pursuing wild ungulates. Cougars kill more deer, and bears more elk fawns, than wolves do in some areas. Human hunters also take their share.



JESSE VARRAUD



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hunter harvest, and other natural predators—means that FWP must be more conservative in some cases when allocating antlerless deer and elk permits.

Adding to the frustration of hunters and state wildlife officials are the years of federal protection that limited Montana's ability to manage the carnivores. "What really irritates so many hunters is that the wolf has been singled out for protection, no matter what happens to elk and deer," says Thompson. "We manage elk, deer, lions, bears, and hunting for a balance, but so far we haven't been able to do that with wolves because we've had one hand tied behind our back."

OTHER FACTORS AT PLAY

All this doesn't mean the presence of wolves automatically sends deer and elk populations rumbling. Hamlin says it's unlikely the presence of wolves will completely wipe out deer and elk anywhere. "Wolves have no ecological incentive to eliminate their food source," he explains. Kelly Proffitt, who filled Hamlin's position and continues to work on elk distribution studies, says that the predators appeared to have little effect (killing just 1 to 4 percent) on elk numbers in some study areas with low ratios of wolves to prey (less than 3 per 1,000 elk), such as the lower Madison, Gravelly-Snowcrest Mountains, and Paradise Valley. Areas have different wolf/elk ratios in large part due to the presence or absence of livestock. Some wolves learn to prey on sheep and cattle and have to

he killed to prevent further depredation, which keeps wolf densities low in many agricultural areas.

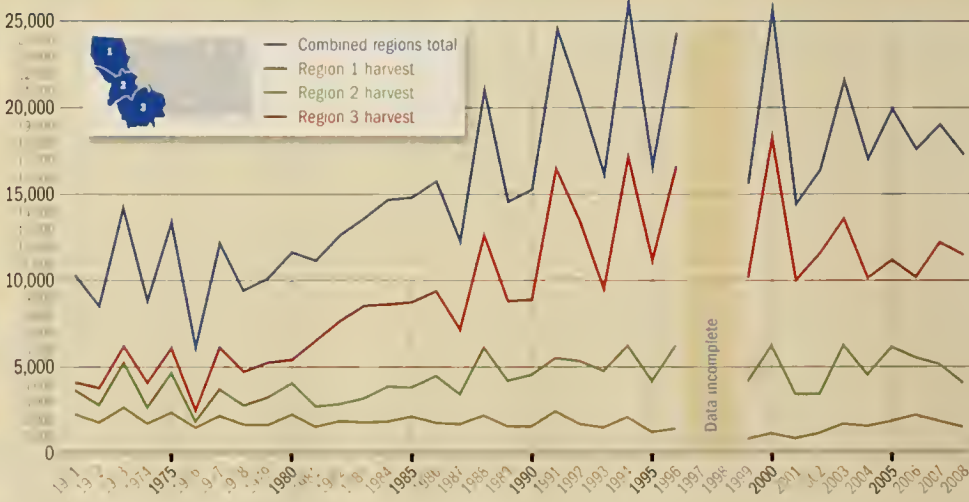
More significant than predators to most prey populations is winter severity. "In our region, winter conditions and the availability of thermal cover drive deer populations more than anything," says Williams. He notes that an abnormally warm and snow-deprived hunting season, poor fawn recruitment following the harsh 2007-08 winter, and a high doe harvest the previous two years contributed greatly to the recent white-tailed deer harvest decline.

Growing numbers of other predators also dine on deer and elk. One Yellowstone study showed that black and grizzly bears kill more newborn elk calves each spring than wolves do. In the northwest, more whitetails die from cougars than from hunters or wolves.

And while wolves are killing thousands of deer and elk in Montana each year, many of those animals would not necessarily have shown up in hunters' rifle sights. Hamlin explains that some deer and elk would have died anyway of other natural causes before hunters had a shot at them. Others are killed by wolves in areas that many hunters can't reach, such as leased private land or remote mountain ranges. "Just because an elk dies from predation or starvation or even falling off a cliff doesn't mean it otherwise would have been available to a hunter," says Hamlin.

Even with wolves present, many factors

Regions 1, 2, 3, and combined elk harvest, 1971-2008



SPOTTED FWP wildlife officials say reports of previously unknown packs by hunters have been essential in helping the department make the case for federal delisting.

determine whether hunters fill their tags each fall. Opportunity, weather during the season—particularly the presence or lack of snow—a hunter's individual skill and effort, and plain old luck all contribute to hunter success. "We've always had years when hunters and biologists were left scratching their heads, even before wolves arrived on the scene," says Thompson.

Though certainly a loss for hunters, there can be ecological benefits to having wolves and other predators reduce overabundant prey populations. Harvest by hunters and predators prevents deer and elk populations from overgrazing natural forage. For instance, though the northern Yellowstone elk herd is down more than 60 percent from its historic peak, biologists say the herd size is now in better balance with the landscape. One study in the park showed that as elk numbers declined, willows and other streamside vegetation that had been browsed to the dirt are now thriving.

Then there's the fact that for some hunters,



JUDY WANTULOK

like Michael Lukas of Missoula, the return of another predator enhances their hunting experience. "The presence of wolves makes the areas where I hunt seem wilder, and that wildness is a large part of what I crave when I go hunting," Lukas says.

WORKING TO REGAIN STATE CONTROL

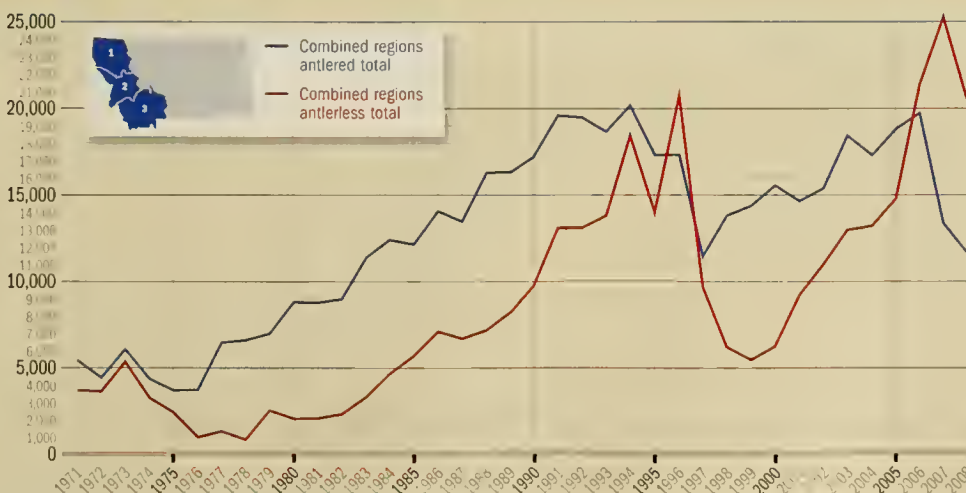
What has FWP done in response to growing wolf numbers? "Along with landowners, hunters, and others, the department has repeatedly fought hard for federal delisting," says Quentin Kujala, head of the FWP Wildlife Management Section. He adds that

the department's five wolf specialists in western Montana investigate reports of wolf sightings and conduct aerial surveys of radio-collared wolves every four to six weeks. Carolyn Sime, FWP statewide wolf coordinator, notes that the department asks hunters to help monitor wolf numbers and distribution by reporting sightings or tracks at hunter check stations and the FWP website. "Hunters are very aware of their surroundings, and they've helped discover many packs previously unknown to us," she says. "That's been essential information for making the case that wolves are fully recovered and should be delisted."

With the wolf now under full state control and management, FWP has initiated a regulated wolf hunting season (see sidebar on page 14) similar to those for lions, black bears, bighorn sheep, and other game

“We have to be open to the possibility that wolves might prevent recovery in some areas, even if we end antlerless elk harvest.”

Regions 1, 2, 3 combined whitetail harvest, 1971-2008



DATA GRAPHICS: MONTANA OUTDOORS. SOURCE: MONTANA FWP

LONG-TERM INCREASE, BUT FOR HOW LONG?

Both elk and white-tailed deer harvest in all three western Montana FWP regions increased over the past several decades. The total annual elk harvest in Regions 1, 2, and 3 combined averaged 12,500 in the 1970s and around 19,000 during the past decade. The annual whitetail harvest in the three regions combined grew from an average of 8,500 in the 1970s to 30,000 in the past decade. No one can be certain how the presence of wolves will affect harvest in the future. "We've managed deer and elk without wolves for 80 years," says one FWP biologist. "Now we're learning how to manage them with wolves. It's a whole different ball game."

species. State wildlife officials believe the hunting season could help reduce animosity toward the wild canids. "I think hunters will feel a lot different about wolves if they have a wolf tag in their pocket," says Williams.

WOLVES ARE HERE TO STAY

Though FWP advocates a wolf harvest, as well as abundant deer and elk numbers, FWP Wildlife Bureau chief Ken McDonald

makes it clear that the department will also work hard to maintain a healthy and viable wolf population. "We intend to make sure wolves continue moving among the subpopulations in the three recovery zones [the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, northwestern Montana, and central Idaho] to maintain genetic connectivity," McDonald says. He explains that allowing animals from the three zones to intermix enables wolves to function

as a single large population rather than three smaller, isolated populations, resulting in more diversity and resilience. McDonald adds that the state will continue to move conservatively when it comes to anything that could endanger the long-term health of the state's wolf population. "Wolves just got off the endangered species list. We need to move slowly and prove that Montana won't do anything that would cause them

COMMISSION SETS MONTANA'S FIRST MODERN WOLF HUNTING SEASON

On July 9, the FWP Commission approved a quota of 75 wolves for the fall 2009 hunting season. Biologists had said as many as 207 wolves could be harvested without dropping below the state's current-but-growing population. The commissioners opted for a smaller quota the first year so the department can learn how the hunting season affects the wolf population as well as to maintain genetic connectivity. "This is all real new, and we want to proceed conservatively," says Ken McDonald, FWP Wildlife Bureau chief. "We don't know how many hunters will apply for licenses or how effective they'll be." The commission also decided that no more than 25 percent of the harvest can come during December when wolves are dispersing, which is important for maintaining genetic mixing and overall long-term population health.

Wolves in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming were removed from federal authority in March 2008, but four months later a federal judge reinstated endangered species protection, citing a lack of evidence demonstrating genetic exchange among wolf subpopulations. In March 2009, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) again delisted the Rocky Mountain gray wolf, this time in Montana and Idaho only, allowing the two states to proceed with state management plans that include carefully regulated hunting seasons.

Montana currently has three times as many wolf packs as the federal recovery goal originally called for. FWP officials say hunter harvest will help manage wolf numbers in areas where livestock depredation has been high or predation on ungulate populations is especially severe.

Many state and national hunting and conservation groups, including the Montana Wildlife Federation, support the hunt. But Lisa Upson of the Natural Resources Defense Council says her organization and other wildlife protection groups believe a hunt in 2009 is premature. "We're close to recovery overall in the region, but we're not there yet," she says.

McDonald says he's not surprised by the diverse opinions. "We listened to a range of viewpoints and came up with what we believe is a well-reasoned, conservative quota for this first wolf season," he says. "Wolves are fully recovered, and they are here to stay. Montanans have worked hard to integrate them into the state's wildlife management programs, which has always been the promise of the Endangered Species Act. This department has been sorely disappointed by the delisting delays over the past few years. We're real pleased that, as promised under the ESA when an endangered species finally recovers, the wolf is again under state management."

McDonald adds that skeptics of Montana's wolf management proposals need only review the state's track record of managing other large carnivores. "Look at mountain lions and black bears. Both continue to have strong and healthy populations, and we see that happening with wolves, too," he says.

A Montana wolf hunt proposed in 2008 was blocked after several wildlife protection groups successfully filed for an injunction. A similar injunction could postpone this year's hunt. McDonald says FWP would again join the USFWS in opposing the injunction and defending the delisting decision in court, as it did last year. ■



“We need to prove that Montana won’t do anything that would cause wolves to slip back to where they could be federally listed again.”

to slip back to where they could be listed again under the Endangered Species Act,” he says. “Then we’d be right back to where we were, with wolf management under federal control.”

How many wolves will Montana eventually hold? McDonald says no one knows for certain. “But given the current knowledge of wolf population dynamics, along with our commitment to maintaining genetic connectivity, statewide wolf numbers likely won’t be all that different from what we’re seeing today,” he says. “At the same time, we’ll have the flexibility and tools to deal with local situations when conditions warrant. That may

mean increasing wolf hunting season quotas in certain areas. But the hard truth is that elk and deer numbers in some areas could end up lower than they were before wolves returned.”

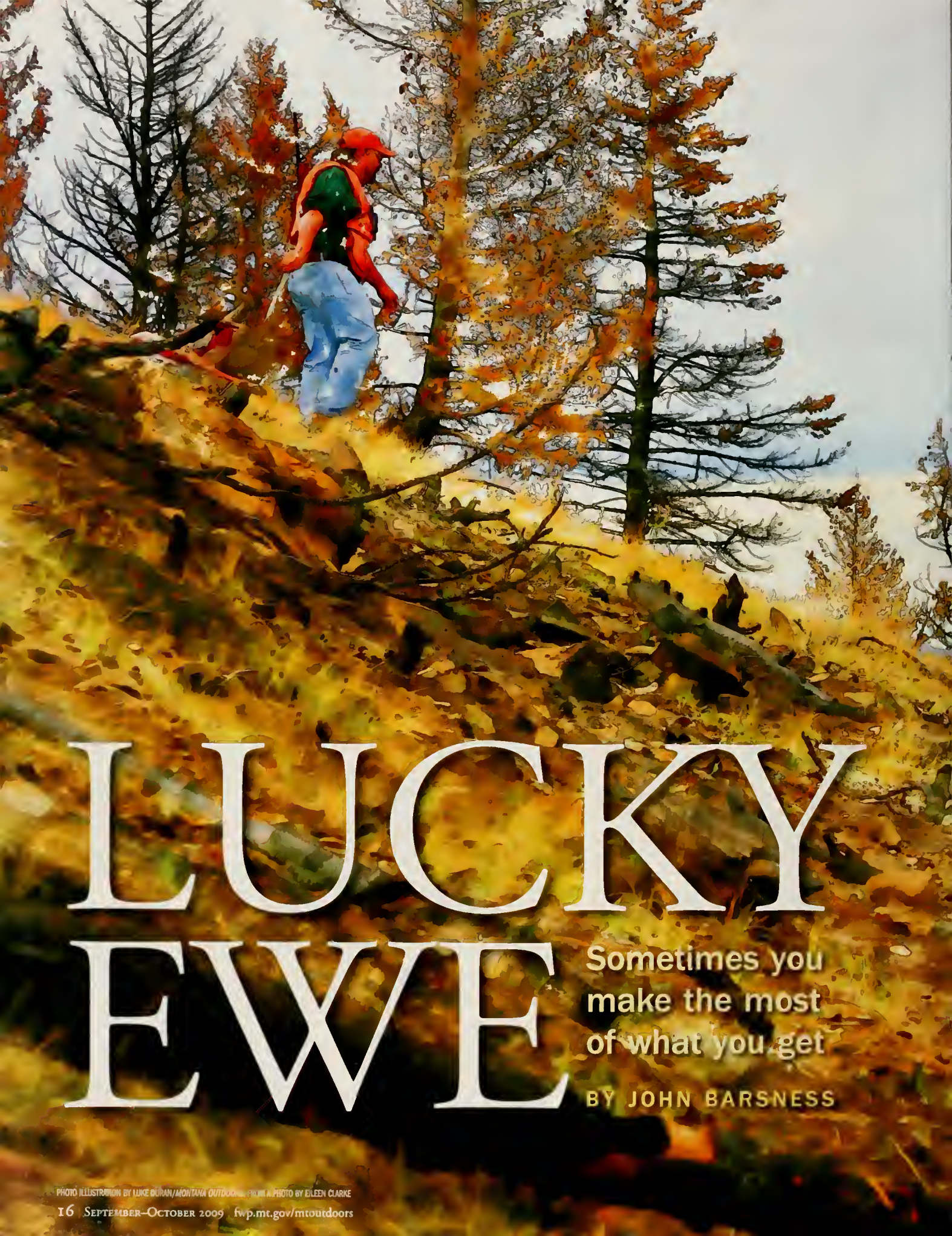
While wolf packs may spread into eastern Montana, their numbers likely will be limited as the animals venture into agricultural areas. “Based on what we’ve seen so far, many will encounter livestock on private land and run into trouble,” says McDonald. Last year a record 110 wolves were killed in Montana under permits authorized by FWP to reduce livestock conflicts, and an additional 45 wolf deaths were documented from other causes. Even with these fatalities, Montana’s wolf

population grew by 18 percent from the previous year.

One thing for certain, says Kujala, is that wherever wolves occur, they become a factor in how Montana manages big game species. “They’re again part of the natural mix of the state’s wildlife,” he says. In some areas, that can create significant changes, with wolves taking big bites out of deer and elk populations. In others, wolves hardly make a dent in prey numbers or human hunting opportunities. But in all cases, the return of wolves means one more element—along with weather, habitat, social concerns, and others—that must be taken into account when the state manages wildlife. “What Montana will do now that wolves are back is the same as it did before,” says Kujala, “which is to find a fair and ecologically sustainable balance among all the state’s large carnivore and wild ungulate species.” 🐺

NOW BOTH HUNTER AND HUNTED Montana okayed a quota of 75 wolves for the state’s first wolf hunting season, to be held this fall. The harvest won’t drastically reduce the wolf population, but it could lessen resentment toward the large carnivores. Says one wildlife manager, “I think hunters will feel a lot different about wolves if they have a wolf tag in their pocket.”





LUCKY EWE

Sometimes you
make the most
of what you get

BY JOHN BARSNESS



As modern hunters, we try to deny luck, regarding our good fortune as something we deserve. Our success arises from studying the animals we hunt like a stockbroker studies the market, buying and practicing with the right equipment, and hunting hard in the right places. When the hunt is over we say, with false humility, "Luck is when preparation and opportunity meet."

But hunting luck takes many forms, some not apparent to the falsely humble. I've been lucky in some hunting, mostly because of my profession as an outdoors writer. Work has meant spending lots of time hunting in my native Montana and locales ranging from Alaska to New Zealand for everything from Cape buffalo to mourning doves. My luck on many trips has been outstanding, ranging from the time I stalked an old male wolverine while in the Arctic to several big elk I've had the chance to shoot during the last moments of the season.

Yet in anything requiring pure gambler's luck, my own stinks. For over three decades, a check with my signature has been annually delivered to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, along with the lottery ticket that is the bighorn sheep license application. And each year the department sends my money back, minus a few bucks for the privilege of applying, with a note indicating I was "Unsuccessful."

My lottery luck continued to run bad even after FWP began allotting "bonus points." Some hunters call these preference points. No. True permit preference points, like what they have in Colorado, move you up in line, ahead of anybody with fewer points. Bonus points are just more chances, like buying 100 individual \$1 raffle tickets at a Ducks Unlimited banquet. You may well hold more tickets than, say, the nonhunting spouse of your hunting buddy. Yet when she buys a single ticket (with money your so-called friend gave her), she wins the shotgun.

Of all the lottery tags in Montana, a bighorn ram is at the top of my list, and that's true for hunters everywhere. This is partly because Montana rams grow very large horns, and also because bighorn sheep hunts in places like British Columbia and Alberta are very expensive.

Why a bighorn ram is considered the apex of North American hunting is somewhat of a mystery. Bighorn sheep, like any sheep, are not very bright as compared to, say, an old whitetail buck. Want proof? There are roughly 100,000 bighorns in North America, and something like 25 million whitetails. (Of course habitat has something to do with this, but still.)

There's also empirical evidence that sheep lack intelligence. I've accumulated some personally over the decades of hanging out in the bighorn-inhabited portions of Montana. In the Missouri Breaks, for instance, rams often just stand there looking at me cross-eyed while I search for elusive mule deer bucks. Then there was the ram on the Rocky Mountain Front that woke me one morning by chomping on grass 50 feet from the tent. When I unzipped the door, the sheep just stared at me, grass sticking out of his mouth like a dry tongue.

One of the dumbest bighorn sheep I've encountered was also one of the biggest. A friend had drawn a ewe tag for the Rock Creek hunting district, so we headed up one Thanksgiving Day. Snow covered the steep slopes that we glassed from the road below. We eventually found one ewe being chased by nine mature rams. It took two hours to climb the 2,000 feet of slippery slope to within rifle range. After my friend shot and began field-dressing the ewe, the biggest of the rams walked over and stood on a rock 30 feet above us, looking down. I looked up at him, while holding one of the legs of his deceased significant other, and wondered how any bighorn sheep survive in modern Montana.

And yet that very innocence is part of the bighorn's mystique. Like caribou, wild sheep are creatures of wilderness. Though we sometimes see both species from highways, caribou and bighorns mostly live in those few patches of 21st-century

Earth where humans remain relatively scarce. Caribou inhabit the tundra at the top of North America, while bighorns live in high mountains, far above the settled valleys.

There is indeed something about bighorn sheep and the high country that sets them apart from any other Montana big game. My wife once drew a ewe tag, the same year my friend drew his Rock Creek permit. The three of us spent several clear September days in the high country along the Front. The aspens were yellowing in the draws, and the sky curved above the limestone face of the mountains.

Eventually we found one little herd in the spotting scope, 3 miles away at timberline. It took most of the day to hike up there. Eileen made a 200-yard shot on terrain so steep the ewe rolled halfway down to us. Though we worked up a sweat packing out the meat, our group bypassed an inviting shady aspen grove. We'd found fresh grizzly tracks on the climb up, and bears like to nap under aspens.

And so I kept applying for a ram each year, certain that before I grew too old to climb the limestone basins of the Front or the crumbling sandstone of the Breaks, a bighorn tag would arrive with my name on it.

When one finally did, two years ago via cyberspace, it felt very strange. I stared at the computer screen for a long time, not believing I'd actually drawn the long-coveted ram tag. I even logged off the FWP website and then on again to see "Successful" under my name.

After about 15 minutes of elated staring, though, I noticed that the season number next to my name didn't seem right. I looked it up in the hunting regulations. It was for a bighorn sheep *ewe* tag. How could that be? I'd never applied for a ewe.

Obviously I'd misread the numbers, or perhaps hit a wrong key.

My elation turned to confusion, anger, and then finally, when reality set in, extreme disappointment. Yes, I knew that if I'd actually applied for a ram permit the odds would have been extremely slim, but I thought I'd finally broken my curse and drawn the elusive Montana ram tag. It was the first year I'd applied on-line. Even though I'd used computers for work since the 1980s, I'd

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never quite trusted them for critical things like paying bills—and applying for big game permits. Now my mistrust proved justified, even though the fault had been my own.

After a day, the hard feelings drained away, leaving an emotional emptiness. Soon the actual tag arrived in the mail. While tearing the envelope open, I still hoped that the computer had been mistaken. But no, there it was, printed in black and white on actual paper: "Adult Ewe."

The tag was accompanied by a note stating that I could return the tag. It would be awarded to the next applicant, and my bonus points would be restored.

The tag and note lay for several days on the table where we pile our mail. Once in a while I'd pick it up. Using the permit would eat up all my bonus points, so the tag remained there, resting quietly, while its would-be owner complained to his patient wife and any friends who would still listen.

Eventually I started thinking rather than whining. I liked hunting any sort of edible animal, and had no problem hunting female antelope, deer, or elk. Heck, I'd be thrilled at the chance to hunt a Montana cow moose, if I could ever draw the darned tag. There were already plenty of trophy heads on our walls.

And I'd really liked eating the meat from Eileen's ewe, one of the most delicious big game animals I've ever tasted.

What's more, I would turn 55 that fall. I remembered the story told to me by an older friend, a veteran Montana hunter who'd hunted wild sheep for decades in many places in North America. He took his last Dall sheep in Alaska when he was 60, and it

was a tremendous ram. But the sheep had been killed on a steep cliff, too late in the day to retrieve it and then hike back down to the main camp. So my friend and his 30-something guide spent the night on the cliff during a snowstorm. My friend said the adventure wasn't nearly as much fun as it would have been 20 years earlier. So I wondered if maybe now was the time to hunt my Montana bighorn, even if it was a ewe.

Then there was the bonus that the hunt would be practically out my back door in the Elkhorn Mountains where, in the 1990s, FWP transplanted some bighorn sheep. When you travel across the globe to hunt, as I have, you end up relying on the locals who know where the game animals hide, what they eat, and how they taste. It can be a great pleasure to find out how Innuits hunt caribou and whales, and to kneel on the tundra and eat cloudberries. Or to bite leaves of the plant called spekboom—a nutritious bush found along the Cape of South Africa that supports thousands of kudu and bushbuck and improves the taste of their meat. Still, even an adventurous hunter can tire of airports and airplanes and yearn for pursuing game near home, where he is the local who knows where deer and elk hide, what they eat, and what

John Barsness, of Townsend, is a freelance writer and co-owner of Deep Creek Press.

makes their meat taste sweet. As I get older, even a pickup ride to the Missouri Breaks or the Rocky Mountain Front becomes less desirable than a local hunt.

In the end I sent in the \$50 required to actually buy the license I'd won and started scouting. The hunting gods had obviously given me a chance to hunt bighorn sheep near home, and I knew I should accept their gift.

Local friends pitched in to help me scout that summer. Eventually we found quite a few bighorns on a slope just below the crest of the Elkhorn ridge. The ridge was almost visible from town, but by the time the season opened on September 15, parts of the Elkhorns had been ablaze for more than a week. Smoke from the fires clouded the view and made the air nearly unbreathable.

Finally a few rainstorms knocked the fires back and cleansed the skies. Eileen and I headed into the mountains in late September and glassed the ridge where we'd found the sheep earlier. Parts of it had burned, but the dark gray ash was already dotted with tufts of green week-old grass. It was ideal bighorn country. The combination of new grass on slopes just below limestone cliffs provided food as well as steep terrain for the sheep to escape predators.

We first spotted a herd of elk, with one 5x5 bull, near the bottom of the burned grass. Farther up a black bear grazed. Then above the bear six mature rams fed uphill toward the cliffs. From a distance, bighorn sheep somewhat resemble mule deer, with the same blocky brown bodies and pale rump, but the sheep's coat is more chocolate-colored while the muley's is grayer.

Though we could see no ewes, we didn't want to spook the rams by approaching any closer because other sheep might come down to feed with them on the new growth. We decided to come back later. That's one advantage of hunting locally, though it felt a little strange to go home and eat lunch in the kitchen, and then take a nap on the couch instead of in a mountain meadow or inside a tent.

The elk and bear were gone by midafter-

noon, and so were the rams. After some glassing we spotted pale animals among the blackened tree trunks up toward the cliffs. We set up the spotting scope and found eight bighorn sheep, none with large horns, their hair the typically paler hue of ewes and lambs.

We hiked to the base of the burn. Eileen stayed there to keep watch on the little herd while I moved up through the lightly scorched forest. The last rain had fallen two days before, but the weather had turned warm and dry again. My boots put up small ash-clouds amid the new grass, which seemed to glow in the dim light.

Climbing nearer the cliffs eventually put me in their afternoon shadow. Everything grew dim because the blackened earth and trees reflected little light. Something pale moved among the dark trees. In the binoculars it turned out to be a bighorn ewe—or perhaps an immature ram. The horns are about the same size.

That's the problem with hunting ewes, solved only by looking carefully at the end of the sheep opposite from the horns. Fine optics really help, perhaps even more than in ram hunting, because you must look between the rear legs for proof positive—the lack of dropped testicles—that a short-horned sheep is indeed female. (Another way is to watch the animal urinate: Males lean slightly forward, while females squat slightly.)

Soon more sheep grazed their way into an opening in the timber. Some were slightly larger than the first I'd seen, but they had lambs at their side and I didn't want to leave an orphan. By now I was prone, the 7x57



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS, FROM A PHOTO BY JUDY WANTUOK

with a round in the chamber, its forend resting on the daypack in front of me. I watched the sheep feed for perhaps longer than necessary, wishing Eileen was there to help in the glassing. When she'd shored her ewe, I'd lain next to her looking through a spotting scope, while we whispered back and forth to confirm which sheep was the right one. The last thing I wanted to do now was mistakenly—and illegally—shoot a young ram. Finally one medium-sized ewe, without a lamb, fed broadside for too long. I aimed carefully behind the shoulder, pushed the safety off, and squeezed the trigger.

By the time I'd tagged the young ewe and dragged it downhill to a more level place for field-dressing, Eileen was halfway up the burn, inside the shadow of the cliffs. Up a canyon to the left a bull elk whistled. Across the valley rose another mountain range, wearing the first horizontal touch of snow on its highest peak. Down in the valley I could see our little town about 10 miles away, including the water tower a block from our house.

I guess that sometimes even the unluckiest of hunters can make his own good luck. ■

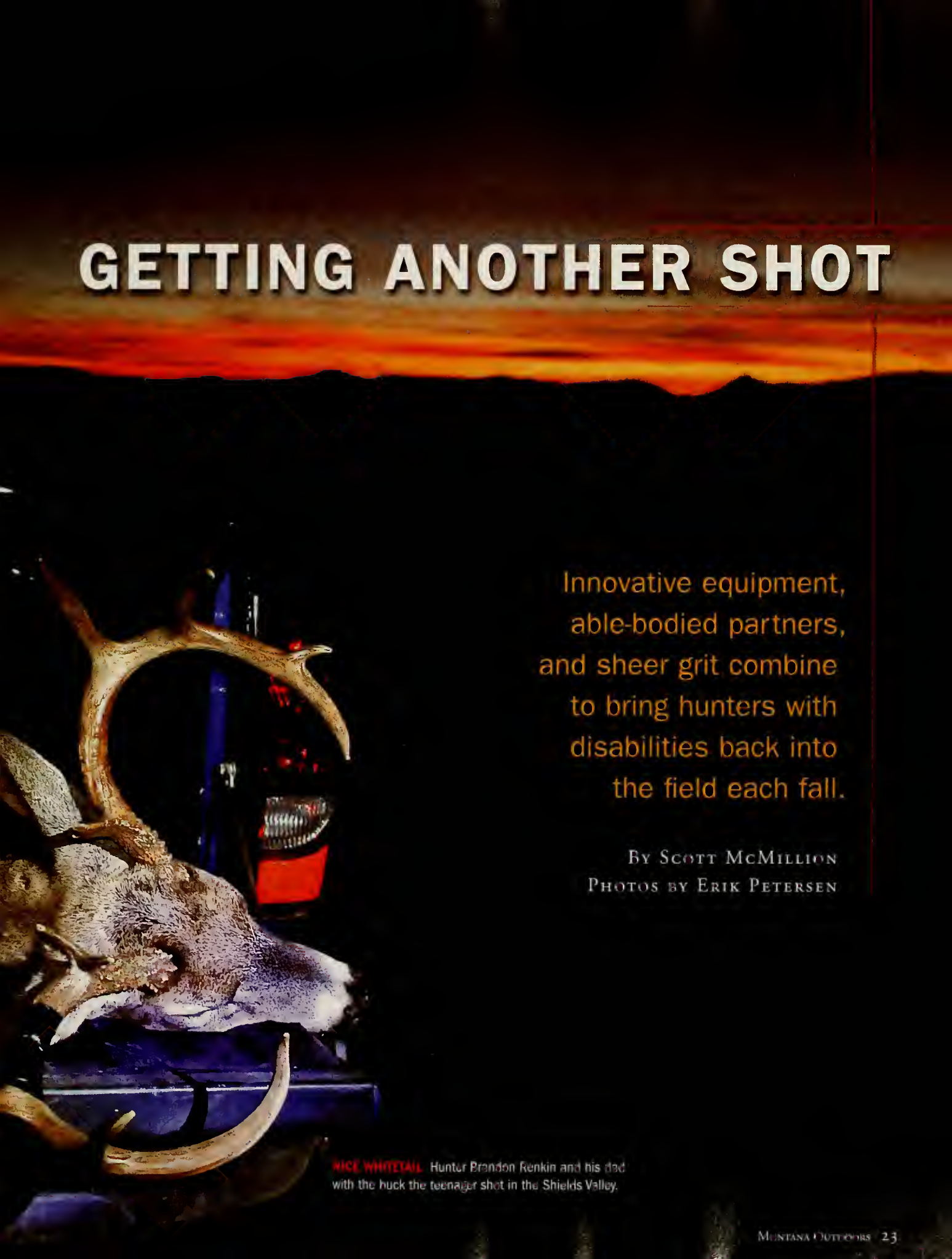


Photographer **Bill Buckley** of Bozeman says what he likes about this photograph is that it captures the "grittiness" of waterfowl hunting and being out in a prairie marsh as a storm is moving in. "So much of waterfowl hunting is about immersing yourself in the environment, and that's what I was going for here with the dog and the water and the front approaching," he says. "I converted it to black and white for two main reasons. One, the setting was real monotone, with monotone sky and water and the camo on the hunter. And monotone works much better in black and white, which also increases that gritty feel, especially with the flat, darkening sky. And then there was the timeless quality of this particular scene with the hunter, the dog, and the decoys that is conveyed even better in black and white." ■





GETTING ANOTHER SHOT



Innovative equipment,
able-bodied partners,
and sheer grit combine
to bring hunters with
disabilities back into
the field each fall.

BY SCOTT McMILLION
PHOTOS BY ERIK PETERSEN

NICE WHITETAIL. Hunter Brandon Renkin and his dad
with the huck the teenager shot in the Shields Valley.

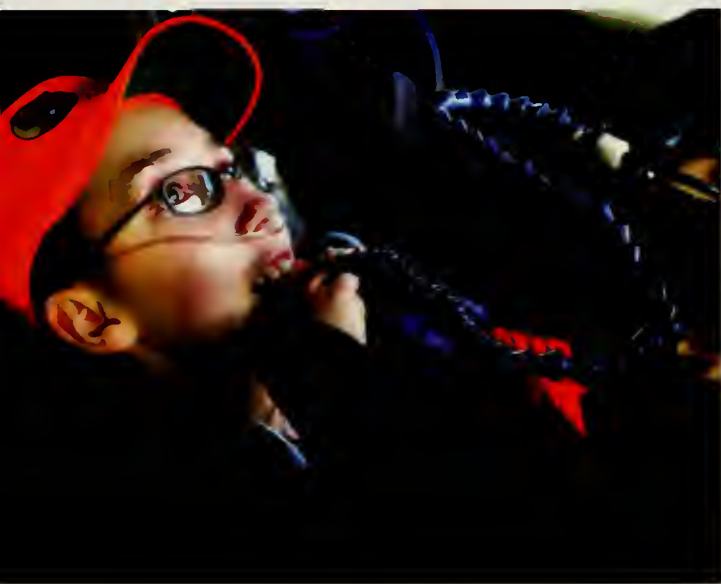
Brandon Renkin isn't very big. Though he's 15 years old, he weighs just 38 pounds.

It's almost all heart. The rest of it is brain and spunk, wrapped in a layer of patience. These are things that make a hunter.

Born with muscular dystrophy, Brandon has never been able to walk. Not a single step. He can't raise a gun or even lift his finger to a trigger. It's difficult for him just to sit up. Yet, in his first three hunting seasons, the Montana teenager has killed two elk, a trophy whitetail buck, several other deer, and an antelope. Most able-bodied adult hunters would envy his record.

His path to becoming a hunter started like that of many other young people, especially in a hunting-crazy town like Gardiner, where Brandon has lived all his life. He'd heard many hunting stories and wanted to try it for himself. "I just decided one day I wanted to take hunter's safety, because I wanted to kill a bull elk," he says.

"I wanted to have some stories like my friends have."



How has he done it? To paraphrase the African proverb, it takes a village to help this hunter—a village that stretches across the nation. Hunters visiting Montana heard Brandon's story and donated money for the specialized equipment he needs. A gunsmith in New York built him a custom rifle. Strangers in Georgia chipped in to buy the sophisticated optics mounted on his gun. Montana landowners opened their properties.

"It's enough people to fill an auditorium," says his father, Roy Renkin, a forest scientist for the National Park Service in Yellowstone National Park. "Some of them are people we've never known, but their

Scott McMillion, of Livingston, is a freelance writer and a senior editor for Montana Quarterly. Erik Petersen is a photographer for the Bozeman Chronicle.

kindness and generosity are overwhelming."

I've known Roy for some time, but I first met his son on the opening day of Montana's 2008 big game rifle season. Brandon was in a wheelchair in the back of his dad's van, and they were picking me up for an afternoon whitetail hunt at the ranch of a friend of mine in the Shields Valley. The day was perfect: Leaves still clung to the cottonwoods, there wasn't a breath of wind, the temperature was mild, and wispy clouds edged a brilliant sky. Roy and I had scouted the property earlier, so we knew that every evening the deer gathered to crop the grass of a hay field. We picked a spot, parked the van, and waited.

Three hours later, a big 5x5 buck lay in the back of the pickup Brandon's mother had driven to the ranch. Brandon's grin stretched from ear to ear, but he was calmer than the rest of us. I was talking way too much, and though it was opening day, I felt like anything I bagged that season would be pure gravy after what I'd just experienced. Photographer Erik Petersen was grinning too, hopping around, taking pictures. The landowner, normally a laconic fellow, had grown so excited watching the hunt through binoculars that his wife finally sent him inside the house to pour himself a drink. Brandon's buck, he told us, was the biggest ever taken on his property.

Brandon endured all this adult foolishness. He wanted to head home to Gardiner before his buddies went to bed. He had some smack to talk and a trophy head to back it up.

It was one of the best hunts of my life, and I never fired a shot.

ABLE TO HUNT

Leonard Livingston knows how I felt that day. For 20 years, he's been helping bring disabled hunters to the field, making it possible for them to bag their own game. He's built hunting blinds, bought vehicles, and constructed a wheelchair-accessible bunkhouse on his ranch near Ekalaka, all so people with disabilities can take to the field and do some shooting. He reckons he's spent about \$100,000 on the project over the years. "It's the greatest feeling in the world, just to see their faces," he says of the people

he helps. "It's all about camaraderie and friendship, just having a good time. You grow a bond with these folks. You never forget them."

Livingston knows firsthand about hunting with a disability. He has multiple sclerosis and spent five years in a wheelchair and another decade on crutches. In 1987, he learned a lesson about ability, as opposed to disability, while in a Wyoming hospital. A group that calls itself Helluva Hunt took him out and showed him he could bag an antelope, something he never thought he'd do again.

Now Livingston spreads that message. He's guided for Helluva Hunt for 20 years and, in 2001, began a program he calls the Beaver Creek Rendezvous on his property and that of some neighbors, totaling about 100,000 acres. Every year, roughly 100 hunters with disabilities from around the country apply. He draws six names from a bag and invites the hunters to his ranch for the opening weekend of Montana's deer season. All they need to do is show up with a valid deer tag, an able-bodied companion, and a willing attitude. Livingston supplies room and board, vehicles, guides, and even guns and ammunition if necessary. He can also help round up adaptive equipment such as gun mounts for wheelchairs and sophisticated scopes that allow the partners to be the "eyes" for blind hunters.

There's a barbecue, live music, and an auction during the three-day event. Each hunter also receives a gift pack full of useful things like hunting knives, hats, and ear protection. Volunteers work the kitchen and the meat processing room, where as many as 17 deer hung from the rack at one time last year.

"I've got 1,100 acres of hay ground, so we see a lot of deer," Livingston says. During the 2008 season, the success rate ran "right around 150 percent," he says. Every hunter killed a buck and many also filled doe tags.

In spring, he invites hunters with disabilities to shoot turkeys over decoys.

Some hunters have visual impairments, others use wheelchairs, and some walk with crutches. Others, like 69-year-old Barbara Wadsworth, are too disabled by arthritis to walk far. "It was fantastic," she says of her

2008 hunt, in which she bagged two deer. Wadsworth has hunted most of her life near her home in western Washington. Like Montana, that state allows hunters with disabilities to shoot from a vehicle, but it's tough to find game from the road in the brushy landscape where she hunts. You have to get lucky, she says. But in the open spaces of eastern Montana, it's much easier to see deer.

Wadsworth is not sure she'll be able to hunt again, so she's glad Livingston and his crew of volunteers made this hunt possible. It puts a fine finish on decades in the field. "This will probably be my last year of hunting, but at least I went out getting a couple deer," she says. "They really work hard for the hunters."

Brandon Renkin killed his first deer on Livingston's ranch, a muley buck, in 2006. Of all the hunters at Beaver Creek Rendezvous over the years, he probably has overcome the biggest physical obstacles to be successful. Brandon hunts with a rifle his father mounts to his wheelchair with a sophisticated bracket. The teen moves a joystick that directs the firearm up and down and back and forth on a battery-powered screw drive. Because sitting up for any amount of time hurts his back, Brandon can't look through a scope. So Roy has rigged up a video camera that replaces a scope. While reclined in his wheelchair, Brandon sees an image of his prey on a computer screen, which includes crosshairs. When a game animal comes into view, he moves the rifle and scope with his joystick until the crosshairs are on the kill zone, then takes a tiny sip of air on a tube in his mouth. That activates the trigger of his custom .280 rifle. More often than not, his dad says, the animal falls dead. Brandon rarely needs more than one shot, even at distances up to 300 yards. "He's pretty confi-



"I just decided one day I wanted to take hunter's safety, because I wanted to kill a bull elk."

dent with that rifle,” says Roy, who adds that his son practices by shooting milk jugs full of water. “He gets to watch them explode on the computer screen.”

An old buddy who grew up with Roy back East built Brandon’s rifle and wouldn’t take any money. Hunting guides

“I thought I was done hunting.”



and their clients in Paradise Valley donated cash to buy the motorized rifle mount for his wheelchair. Roy obtained the optics when a friend at Montana State University put him in touch with a Georgia man who builds remote video cameras for observing wildlife. Roy asked the man to send a bill. He sent a letter instead, explaining that his church group had paid for the components. For his labors, he wanted a simple payment. “I, as well as a number of good people here in Georgia, am

looking forward to hearing the stories and seeing the pictures” of Brandon’s hunt, he wrote.

Brandon and Roy make sure he gets them, along with some homemade jerky.

A LITTLE HELP

Some hunters with disabilities do fine with standard equipment and a little help from friends. Arnold Huppert, a retired lawyer in Livingston, has been hunting birds and big game most of his 77 years. Like most people with his experience, he can tell stories all day long. Good ones. But 15 years ago, a pair of strokes paralyzed his left side. “I thought I was done hunting,” he says.

Then some hunting buddies put their heads together and built a duck blind with a wheelchair ramp on a ranch with lots of sloughs and springs. There, warmed by a propane heater, Huppert awaits waterfowl, as he and I did last December. Since he only has one good arm, he propped his double-barreled 20-gauge in a metal triangle suspended from the blind’s window frame by a springy hunk of rubber. The simple but effective contraption holds his gun up while providing a wide field of motion.

Under Huppert’s orders, I kept my goose call in my pocket. Under his precise direction, I placed duck decoys. While those were both good ideas, we got skunked anyway. But nobody minded. “No ducks, but it’s a perfect day,” Huppert said.

For deer and antelope, Huppert uses an even simpler setup: a pad duct-taped to his truck’s passenger-side mirror as a rifle rest. As he does most years, he shot an antelope and a deer in 2008. He hunts with friends, sons, and grandsons, remaining part of the family’s

► Helpful regulations, programs, and information for disabled hunters

Montana has special rules, regulations, and even license fees to facilitate hunters with disabilities. For instance, disabled hunters may apply for FWP permits that allow them to shoot from a vehicle or modify their archery and firearm equipment. Some deer, elk, and antelope tags are set aside for hunters with disabilities, and resident conservation and fishing licenses sell for reduced rates. For details, visit fwp.mt.gov/recreation/ctb/licensing.html.

The U.S. Forest Service allows disabled hunters to drive beyond locked gates in some areas. Locations may change from one year to the next, so call the Forest Service office in the area where you’d like to hunt.

The Sapphire Ranch south of Missoula offers waterfowl hunting for those who have a state Permit to Hunt from a Vehicle (PTHFV), and you can find wheelchair-accessible



ERIK PETERSON

long hunting tradition.

He even fly fishes one-handed. And though casting and setting the hook remain easy, landing a trout takes some effort with one arm. But he gets the job done. "I got three last time I went," he says. "It was just as exciting as when I used to catch 20."

GATHERING STORIES

Like Huppert, Brandon Renkin says he hunts for the excitement, the companionship, and the joy of getting outdoors. The straight-A student at Gardiner High School tells me his favorite class is PE, where he likes Nerf dodgeball and plays goalie in gym hockey, where he often gets hit in the head with the ball. Like most kids his age, he enjoys video games, potato chips, and soda pop. He likes to hang with his buddies, but his wheelchair won't fit through the doors of most homes, so that cuts down on his socializing. "I spend a lot of time in my room," he says. "I don't get to go out much."

But with the help of his father and others, hunting is possible. He wants to shoot more elk, deer, and antelope, but he's also hoping for a chance at bison, moose, and turkeys. "I want to have some stories like my friends have," he says.

So he's gathering them. Last year's white-tail buck made for a good one: After the buck edged into the field, Brandon had to wait about 40 minutes for the deer to wander into his field of view, which was limited by his

position inside the van. Then his dad had to move the van a few feet, hoping the animal wouldn't spook. Everyone in the van—Brandon, both parents, photographer Petersen, and I—had to keep silent and still for what seemed like an eternity. Any movement would jiggle the van, wheelchair, and gun, throwing off the shot. It was a team effort, but Brandon was the coolest member of the crew before, during, and after the hunt. He didn't complain about the long delay. He patiently waited for everything to line up and then made his shot when the time was right.

We talked later about hunting and why he does it. Though he has grown accustomed to rising at 5 a.m., the cold takes a steely grip on his small body. But he still goes out at every opportunity. "The best part is right when you see them," he says. "You know what's going to happen next. You really want to pull the trigger, but you have to wait for the right moment."

Spoken like a true hunter. 🐾



"No ducks, but it's a perfect day."

blinds on the Ninepipe and Freezout Lake wildlife management areas, managed by FWP.

The Montana Access to Outdoor Recreation Program, part of the University of Montana Center for Excellence in Disability Education, Research, and Service, offers free equipment rental, adaptive equipment information, and other services. Visit recreation.ruralinstitute.umn.edu/Mator/index.asp.



For more information on the Beaver Creek Rendezvous, visit beavercreekrendezvous.com or call (406) 775-6276. The Buckmasters American Deer Foundation has information for hunters with disabilities at badf.org/DisabledHunters/tabid/128/Default.aspx. The National Wild Turkey Federation's Wheelin' Sportsmen Program for disabled hunters is at wheelinsportsmen.org.

Harvesting Information from the Hunt

Crews at mandatory hunter check stations gather data that biologists use to manage deer, elk, and other wildlife.

BY TOM DICKSON. PHOTOS BY LINDA THOMPSON AND TOM DICKSON

If there is an epicenter to North American hunting, it might be the Fish, Wildlife & Parks hunter check station in Augusta, about an hour's drive west of Great Falls. Hunters from across Montana and the United States drive through here on their way to the Rocky Mountain Front or the Bob Marshall Wilderness in search of elk, mule and white-tailed deer, and bighorn sheep.

Upland birds and pronghorn live in the prairies just to the north, and nearby Freezout Lake is a waterfowl mecca. I've stopped at the station many times over the years to report what game I have—and more often, haven't—bagged. I'm here today to learn why FWP established this and other hunter check stations (also known as game or biological check stations), and what biologists, wardens, and wildlife technicians do. >>



WEIGHING IN At the Augusta hunter check station along the Rocky Mountain Front, FWP area game warden Dave Holland weighs a mule deer doe. Wildlife technician Audra Labert records information such as where and when the hunter shot the deer and how many days he had been hunting. The information, along with similar data gathered at another dozen check stations statewide, helps wildlife managers determine hunting harvest and, subsequently, adjust quotas and seasons.

BOB DICKSON

Open seven days a week throughout the hunting season from 5:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., the Augusta station is bustling this cloudless, cold mid-November afternoon. Stopping to report their success are hunters ranging from urban weekenders in shiny SUVs to local farmers in battered pickups out for a few hours before evening chores. A couple of weatherworn backcountry outfitters stop in, their bandannas, leather chaps, boot spurs, and faded Stormy Kromers announcing their authenticity.

Area wildlife biologist Brent Lonner tells me there has been a hunter check station operating in this general area since 1910.

A crowd gathers around a pickup holding a 6x6 bull elk, its antlers and dark hind legs sticking up from the bed. Three local girls who have walked up the road a few blocks from town watch Audra Labert. The FWP

been killed, likely due to mild weather keeping herds at high elevations. Others crowd around a bulletin board that holds snapshots, taken by Lonner and his crew, of hunters with their elk, deer, and—drawing the most oohs and aahs—bighorn sheep. Then someone enters with the real McCoy. The 17-year-old hunter shot the ram earlier that day on Castle Reef. His dad, who helped out on the hunt, is beaming. “I’ve put in for that tag for 37 years, and he puts in for just two and was drawn,” he tells me as Lonner looks for a tape to measure the horns.

Dave Holland, the local FWP game warden, stays outside visiting with hunters while keeping an eye on trucks as they pass, looking for hunter orange in the cabs or animal legs sticking up from beds. Stopping at the station is mandatory—both when going to and coming from a hunting location, whether you

have game or not. But Holland is not looking to ticket anyone. Unlike the Sunday evening surprise enforcement stations, where wardens

All afternoon a steady stream of vehicles pull in for inspection. A battered Subaru driven by a college student carries a small whitetail buck in the back. A hunter in a pickup with Washington plates proudly reports he’s just taken his first buck, a big muley with thick, dark antlers. Madison Sechena and Emily Brennan, both age 15 and still wearing pajamas, show off the mule deer bucks each shot the day before at Madison’s dad’s backcountry camp.

It’s not all big game. Clay Scott and Steve Wilson from Helena stop in to report their morning’s bag of two Huns and a sharptail. And I give notice of the sole rooster I’d shot earlier in the day. Lonner says during the height of the waterfowl migration, hunters also stop in with ducks, snow geese, and tundra swans.

The biologist says he welcomes the opportunity the game check station gives him to talk to hunters, landowners, and outfitters. “It’s a great way to get important biological data and also input about what people like and don’t like about FWP rules and regulations, and what they are seeing in the backcountry, like lots of elk calves in a certain area,” he says. “A lot of it is just listening to folks, being there so they can talk to you, ask questions. I try to register everything I hear, all that information. It helps with the decisions I make.”

“It’s the one time of year we can get out and talk with a lot of hunters. I register everything I hear, all that information. It helps with the decisions I make.”

wildlife technician, who has been here since before sunup, measures the antler beams and tines then notes whether the truck carries an ATV or horses. Dan Lowe, another technician, asks the hunter when and where he shot the animal and how many days he’d been hunting. With a pocketknife, Lowe slices the animal’s cheek to look at its back teeth. “We can judge an animal’s age by how much wear we see on these premolars and molars,” he says, pointing to caramel-colored teeth worn to nubs.

Inside the check station cabin, Lonner shows two hunters who have drawn bighorn sheep tags where they might find mature rams. The small cabin is a combination information kiosk, warming hut, and community center. Hunters stop in to check a chalkboard showing the elk harvest in popular Hunting District 442. So far only 57 elk of the quota of 300 allowed this year have

watch incoming vehicles with binoculars and chase down game-laden trucks that don’t stop, this is a biological check station. “The goal here is not to catch poachers but to gather information used to set hunting seasons and conduct other aspects of wildlife management,” Holland explains.



FIRST MULIES Two young hunters fresh from the backcountry have their photo taken for the brag board at the Augusta check station.

DECADES OF DATA

Montana wildlife officials have been asking to look in hunter’s game bags since the early 1900s. Originally the counts were limited to what backcountry wardens on horseback saw hanging on game poles. Today biologists gather information at stations in Augusta, Bonner, Gardiner, Darby, Anaconda, Big Timber, Cameron, Dillon, Lavina, Broadview, Billings, Big Timber, and several other sites statewide. Some stations are simply pickup trucks on the roadside; others are portable trailers set up for the season where FWP staff can enter data into computers and stay warm and dry.

FWP gathers detailed harvest information from winter hunter phone surveys and monitors wildlife populations using aerial counts and other methods. “But there’s no question

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.



DEER BED Above: University of Montana student Brett Brueer checks tags at the Bonner check station. Below: FWP Missoula-area wildlife biologist Vickie Edwards prepares to cut the cheek of a whitetail doe to determine its age by checking wear on the third premolar. "We can easily see if the deer is a fawn or a yearling," says Edwards. "Then at age two-and-a-half, the adult teeth begin erupting. As adults, the third premolar shows the wear. After age nine, there's so much wear that it's just a guess." Below left: Brueer with sample premolars showing various degrees of wear. Left: Rick Specht, Robert Ridling, and Mike Ridling talk to Edwards about hunting in HD244 that day.





LINDA THOMPSON



TOM JACKSON

PRECISE MEASUREMENTS: Clockwise from top: Edwards explains to University of Montana student volunteer Jeremy Brown how to enter data collected at the Bonner station. Hunter Nick Ruiz talks with other FWP employees as Edwards ages his whitetail buck, taken earlier that day from the Ojando area. Hunter Steve Mace shows off his whitetail buck at the Bonner check station. Brant Lonner, area wildlife biologist at the Augusta check station, measures the base horn circumference of a bighorn ram shot earlier that day along the Rocky Mountain Front. Justin Gude, who supervises the FWP Wildlife Research and Technical Services Unit, says biologists would have a hard time managing wildlife without the check station data: "Seeing what hunters do or don't have in the back of their pickups, year after year, is essential real-time information."



LINDA THOMPSON



LINDA THOMPSON

that seeing what hunters do or don't have in the back of their pickups, year after year, is essential real-time information," says Justin Gude, who supervises FWP's wildlife research. He notes that a low harvest recorded at the check stations, factored in with weather and other conditions, may indicate a declining population that might require restricting the doe or cow harvest the following year to allow recovery. Conversely a high harvest may indicate the population could withstand a higher doe or cow harvest next season.

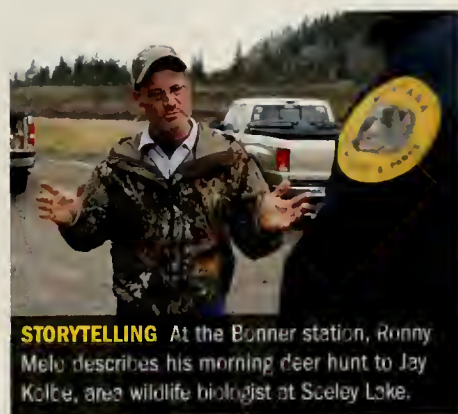
"Check stations also monitor the ratio of successful to unsuccessful hunters," Gude adds. "When we see harvest is up, that may be largely due to more hunters, not more deer or elk."

The check stations provide wildlife managers with information several months before winter phone surveys are completed and tabulated. Jay Kolbe, area wildlife manager at Seeley Lake, says the FWP Commission reviewed check station results this past spring as it decided whether to okay biologists' proposals for adjusting the 2009 hunting season regulations in northwestern Montana. "We showed the commission our check station data indicating last season's whitetail population decline to justify withdrawing our region's over-the-counter whitetail B licenses for 2009," says Kolbe. Without the check station information, he adds, the commission might have been reluctant to restrict B licenses, which could have led to a doe overharvest in 2009.

BUMMED IN BONNER

It's the last day of the big game season at the Bonner check station, along the Blackfoot River on busy Montana Highway 200 east of Bonner. Most vehicles are pulling into the "no game to report" lane, where they get asked only a few questions before being waved on. The empty pickup beds are no surprise. Though it's nearly December, the thermometer reads 45 degrees, and the surrounding mountains here and throughout western Montana have almost no snow.

Across the highway stands what's known locally as the Weimer "meat pole," where a ranching family hangs its harvest. Today the crossbeam sags under the weight of two bull



STORYTELLING At the Bonner station, Ronny Melo describes his morning deer hunt to Jay Kolbe, area wildlife biologist at Seeley Lake.

LINDA THOMPSON

elk, one cow elk, and a big whitetail buck. That doesn't make unsuccessful hunters stopping at the station any happier. Neither do the pickups pulling trailers with mounds of pronghorn and muleys from eastern Montana, which are waved through because the station gathers information only on harvest from the Blackfoot watershed.

Checking the harvest today is Kolbe along with Vickie Edwards, FWP wildlife biologist at Missoula, and Jessica Stirling, a wildlife biology undergrad at the University of Montana. (Like other students at the station, Stirling gets class credit and hands-on experience while FWP receives free labor.) As a pickup pulls into the "no game" lane, Edwards asks a few quick questions—"Hey guys, how's it going today? Where were you hunting? See any wolves, lions, or griz?"—before thanking the occupants and waving them on. In recent years, as predator populations have grown in the region, FWP began asking hunters about sightings. "It really helps us keep in touch with hunters' attitudes toward predators and find out where the sightings occur," Edwards says.

While Kolbe checks two whitetail does in the trunk of an old sedan, he explains how he uses information gathered at the station, which has been operating here since 1958. "As recently as last week, when the regional managers were deciding on whether to extend the deer season, we were looking at check station data from over the years, and

we found that even though harvest is low, it wasn't low enough from a historical perspective to justify an extension," he says.

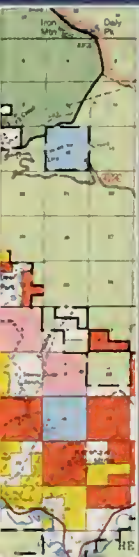
Kolbe adds that while the station captures only one-quarter of the overall Blackfoot hunting district's harvest each fall, he's amazed at how well it correlates with comprehensive hunter surveys conducted in winter. "For instance, if the number of bucks checked into this station increases 20 percent from the previous year, the phone surveys done later in the year almost always indicate about a 20 percent increase," he says.

As afternoon turns to evening, more game animals begin showing up. Tony Liane from Bonner drives in with a 3x3 whitetail he shot east of Ovando. "Saw a lot of lion tracks," he tells Edwards. Chris Hathaway of Missoula pulls in with a big elk calf he shot after hunting nearly every day of the season. "Today was the first time I could get a good shot," he says, adding that while carting the calf 6 miles through the woods back to the truck, he saw at least 100 other elk. "More than I've seen all season combined," he says, then shrugs.

“We used the data as recently as last week, when the regional managers were deciding on whether to extend the season.”

"What can you do?" The trophy of the day is a magnificent 6x6 bull elk shot in the Scapegoat Wilderness by Nikolai Yarmolich, who moved to Missoula in 1994 from the country of Belarus. "Nice bull, eh?" he says, lifting the animal's massive head to display the thick-beamed rack.

Then Paul Teagle of Missoula pulls in with his daughter Cortney. He shows off his 4x4 whitetail buck and the girl's big doe, both taken just east of Ovando Mountain. Cortney proudly reports to Edwards that she stalked the doe to within about 80 yards and killed it with a single shot. "That's not on my list of biological and harvest questions," says Edwards. "But it's the kind of nice thing you get to hear and one of the reasons I like working the check station." 🐾

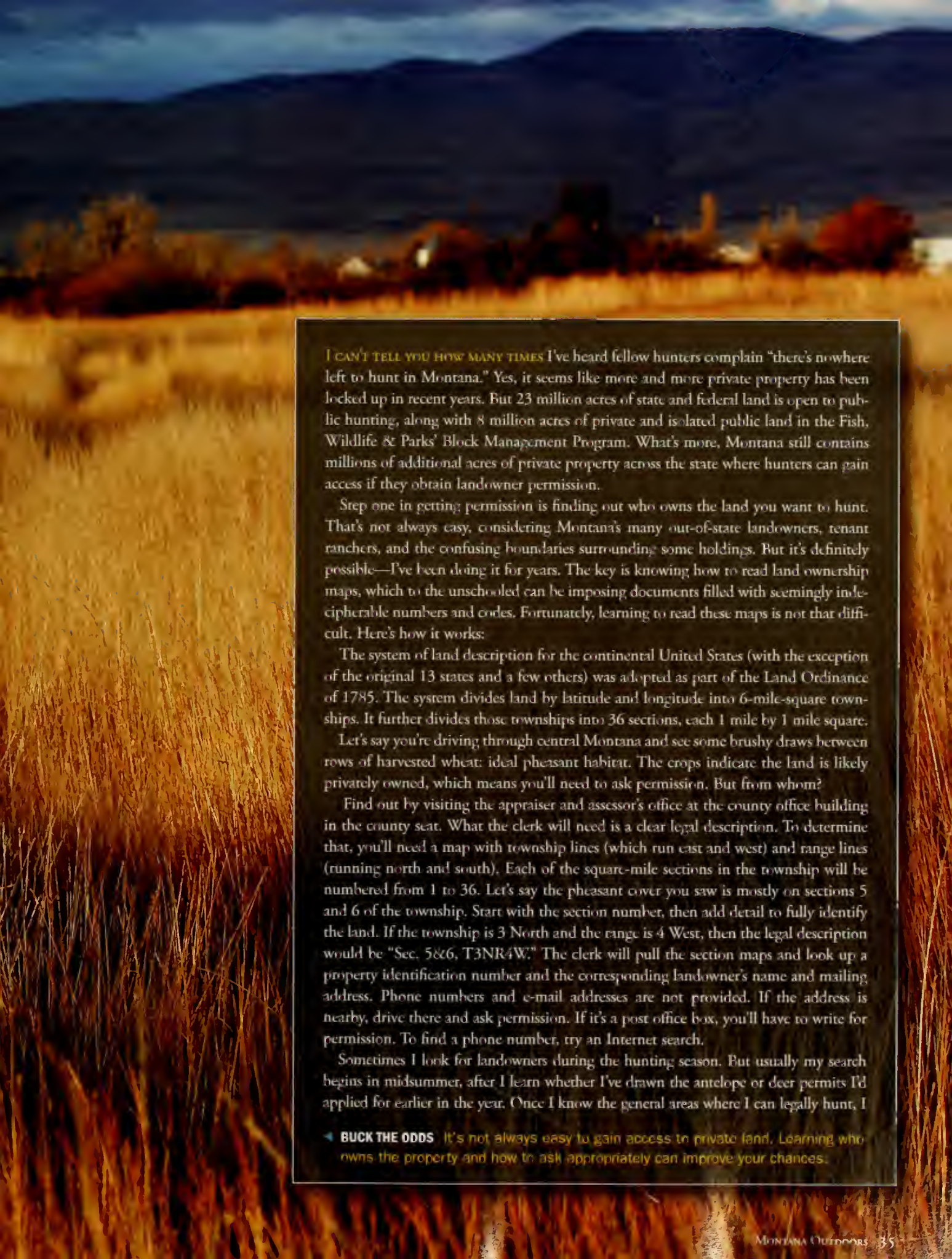


LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF LAND OWNERSHIP

Deciphering descriptions like "Sec. 5&6, T3NR4W" can increase your odds of gaining hunting access.

By DAVID VICKERY





I CAN'T TELL YOU HOW MANY TIMES I've heard fellow hunters complain "there's nowhere left to hunt in Montana." Yes, it seems like more and more private property has been locked up in recent years. But 23 million acres of state and federal land is open to public hunting, along with 8 million acres of private and isolated public land in the Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Block Management Program. What's more, Montana still contains millions of additional acres of private property across the state where hunters can gain access if they obtain landowner permission.

Step one in getting permission is finding out who owns the land you want to hunt. That's not always easy, considering Montana's many out-of-state landowners, tenant ranchers, and the confusing boundaries surrounding some holdings. But it's definitely possible—I've been doing it for years. The key is knowing how to read land ownership maps, which to the unschooled can be imposing documents filled with seemingly indecipherable numbers and codes. Fortunately, learning to read these maps is not that difficult. Here's how it works:

The system of land description for the continental United States (with the exception of the original 13 states and a few others) was adopted as part of the Land Ordinance of 1785. The system divides land by latitude and longitude into 36-mile-square townships. It further divides those townships into 36 sections, each 1 mile by 1 mile square.

Let's say you're driving through central Montana and see some brushy draws between rows of harvested wheat: ideal pheasant habitat. The crops indicate the land is likely privately owned, which means you'll need to ask permission. But from whom?

Find out by visiting the appraiser and assessor's office at the county office building in the county seat. What the clerk will need is a clear legal description. To determine that, you'll need a map with township lines (which run east and west) and range lines (running north and south). Each of the square-mile sections in the township will be numbered from 1 to 36. Let's say the pheasant cover you saw is mostly on sections 5 and 6 of the township. Start with the section number, then add detail to fully identify the land. If the township is 3 North and the range is 4 West, then the legal description would be "Sec. 5&6, T3NR4W." The clerk will pull the section maps and look up a property identification number and the corresponding landowner's name and mailing address. Phone numbers and e-mail addresses are not provided. If the address is nearby, drive there and ask permission. If it's a post office box, you'll have to write for permission. To find a phone number, try an Internet search.

Sometimes I look for landowners during the hunting season. But usually my search begins in midsummer, after I learn whether I've drawn the antelope or deer permits I'd applied for earlier in the year. Once I know the general areas where I can legally hunt, I

◀ **BUCK THE ODDS** It's not always easy to gain access to private land. Learning who owns the property and how to ask appropriately can improve your chances.

visit or phone the local FWP office and talk to biologists about game animal populations to narrow down my search. Next I consult my Bureau of Land Management maps, which show boundaries of public and private land, and drive to the area to scout around. I look for the type of habitat that holds the game species I'm after. When I find it, I check to see if the land is private.

Of course, just because I have the legal description doesn't mean the landowner will grant me access. But it helps. I've found that many landowners appreciate the effort it takes to research land records and find the proper person to ask. Another value of learning to decipher land ownership maps: You gain confidence when hunting on public land that you

David Vickery, who lives near Custer, has been obtaining permission to hunt private land for 45 years.

won't inadvertently trespass on adjacent private property.

A few years ago, I planned a hunt with my two boys, ages eight and nine. I wanted their first big game hunting experience to go smoothly. Once I decided which hunting district to hunt, I scouted and found a location that seemed perfect. Part of it was public land, but there was no legal access, except across a private ranch. After looking at my map and writing out a legal description of the private property, I stopped at the county courthouse. In just a few minutes, I obtained the owner's name and address. I found his name in the local phone book and called. I explained that I was looking for a place to take my two youngsters on their first big game hunt and hoped to gain permission to cross his land to reach the public sections. Like so many Montana ranchers, he was friendly and hospitable. He said we could use his ranch for

access and even hunt there if we made sure gates were left as we found them and we kept our vehicle on ranch roads. The boys and I had a great hunt.

Most landowners I talk to seem to appreciate being asked in person. And no wonder. Before I would consider opening my land to strangers, I'd want to look them in the eye and size them up face to face. But sometimes that's not possible, so you'll need to make a phone call. If you have time and can't reach the landowner any other way, a politely written letter can work.

No matter how I communicate, I always treat landowners with respect and gratitude and present myself as the ethical and respectable hunter I am. Legal property descriptions can help identify who owns a property, but it's ultimately your responsibility to assure landowners you are worthy of their trust and generosity. 🐾

How to read a land ownership map

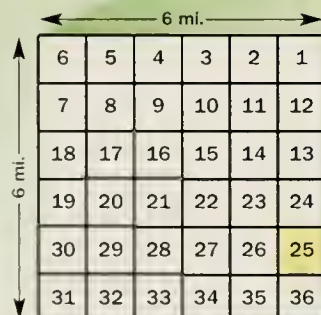
The 224-year-old system of land description used in Montana and most states divides land by latitude and longitude into 6-mile-square townships. It further divides those townships into 36 square sections, each 1 mile by 1 mile.

BASELINE

R7W R6W R5W R4W R3W R2W R1W R1E

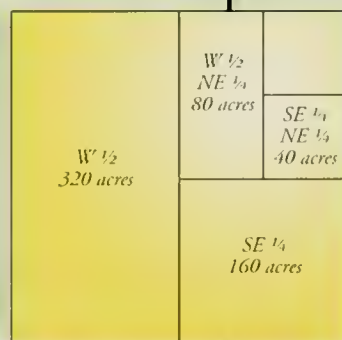
T2S, R4W

Range lines run north and south.
Township lines run east and west.



6 sq. miles = 1 township/range block

Townships are 6-mile-by-6-mile blocks indexed relative to meridian lines, which run north and south, and baselines, which run east and west. Townships are divided into 36 blocks called sections, each 1 mile square.

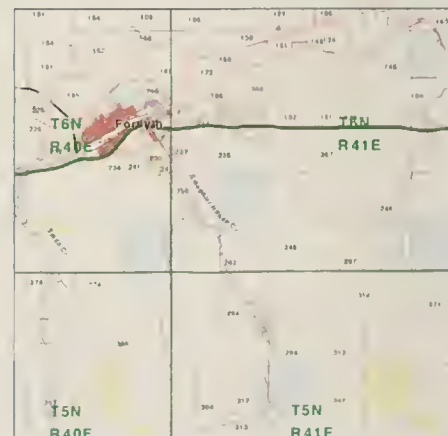


Sec. 25, T2SR4W

1 section block equals 1 square mile, or 640 acres total. Sections are further divided into quadrants.

Montana Public Land Ownership Maps

Another way to locate landowners is through the on-line Montana Private Land Ownership Maps, produced by the Montana Natural Heritage Program. Visit nris.state.mt.us/gis/ownmaps.asp and click on the map for the area you want to view, then click on "Private Lands Map." Locate the parcel and look up its number on the "Private Lands List" for the name of the landowner (addresses are not shown).



THE FIELD

Sometimes a fine piece of land is more than just a place to hunt.

BY LARRY MICHNEVICH

There is a field in north-central Montana that was made for my English setter, Quester, and me. I came across it several years ago when it was enrolled in Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Block Management Program. A county road runs along the east and south sides. The home ranch sits to the north. From the south, the field extends up a gentle hill and then rolls smoothly down to a dry creek bottom. The creek was not always dry; a few cottonwoods stand sentinel in a loosely dispersed formation.

The south-facing slope is the largest part of the field. It is in tall grass, between knee and hip high. Quester glides through it beautifully.

The field also has a slight upward tilt to the east. Just before it reaches the road it drops down about ten feet to the grade.

When looking from the road, the slight undulations in the slope are not clearly evident. You find them by foot. Each has its own way of being part of this magnificent field. They add to its character, which the field is not short on.

There are birds in the field.

I usually park near the southwest corner because there is a gate I can enter there, and also because it holds a covey of Huns. That is, if they are not on the other side of the fence, on the neighboring ranch. It depends. When Quest finds and points them, it is quick action. The birds invariably fly across the fence line to the adjacent private ranch, where they are untouchable.

From there I generally cast Quester to the east, working the strip along the road. This is where I am most likely to encounter sage-grouse. Those birds are strongly inclined to fly across the road. I try to cut them off at the pass, so to speak, so that I am not shooting over or across the road. Those big birds are always impressive.

After working the lower side, I rake on the field. How I go is dictated by the wind. The field lacks obvious places for Quester to zero



LARRY MICHNEVICH

The third time we met was different. Quest pinned him right in the open.

in on, so it's more productive for him to work it over methodically.

Sharptails may be found most anywhere, and there is another covey of Huns toward the center.

Near the crest of the hill, on the west side, I always encounter a single rooster pheasant. It may not be the same bird each time, but I like to think it is.

The first time Quest worked the bird, the

dog was still young. It made a fool of us both. Quest smelled the rooster, but we never saw him.

The second time, the following year, was a little better, but the bird still won handily. Quest was working the rooster's track in a deliberate manner when I saw the bird flush way out ahead of us.

The third time we met was different. Quest pinned him right in the open, within yards of where we had met the two previous times.

I was well within gun range when the rooster figured he'd had enough and launched into the air like a rocket, straight up so I could see his back and outstretched wings. Long tail feathers reached up to a fan fully spread at the tail's base. I saw flashes of blue epaulettes from his wings. His back showed bright with the rich, deep chestnut that flashed gold flecks from the sun. Then there was his broad, white neckband below the iridescent head. It was an image of more than just a bird. It was what bird hunting is all about for me. I took it all in and let him fly on to next year in the bird hunter's version of catch and release.

The field has been good to me. It has given me birds when I deserved them, and I have respected the field and its owner by not abusing their hospitality. I limit my kill and rarely kill my limit. Bird hunting, with a fine dog, means too much to me to reduce it to a game of how many I shoot.

Most important, the field is owned by a rancher who has nurtured it and keeps it healthy. We have become good friends. I am grateful for his generosity of letting me share his treasure. 🐾

Larry Michnevich lives in Bozeman.



MICHAEL FURMAN

GROWING PHEASANTS NATURALLY

FWP, the BLM, and Pheasants Forever team up to improve upland bird habitat on public land in south-central Montana

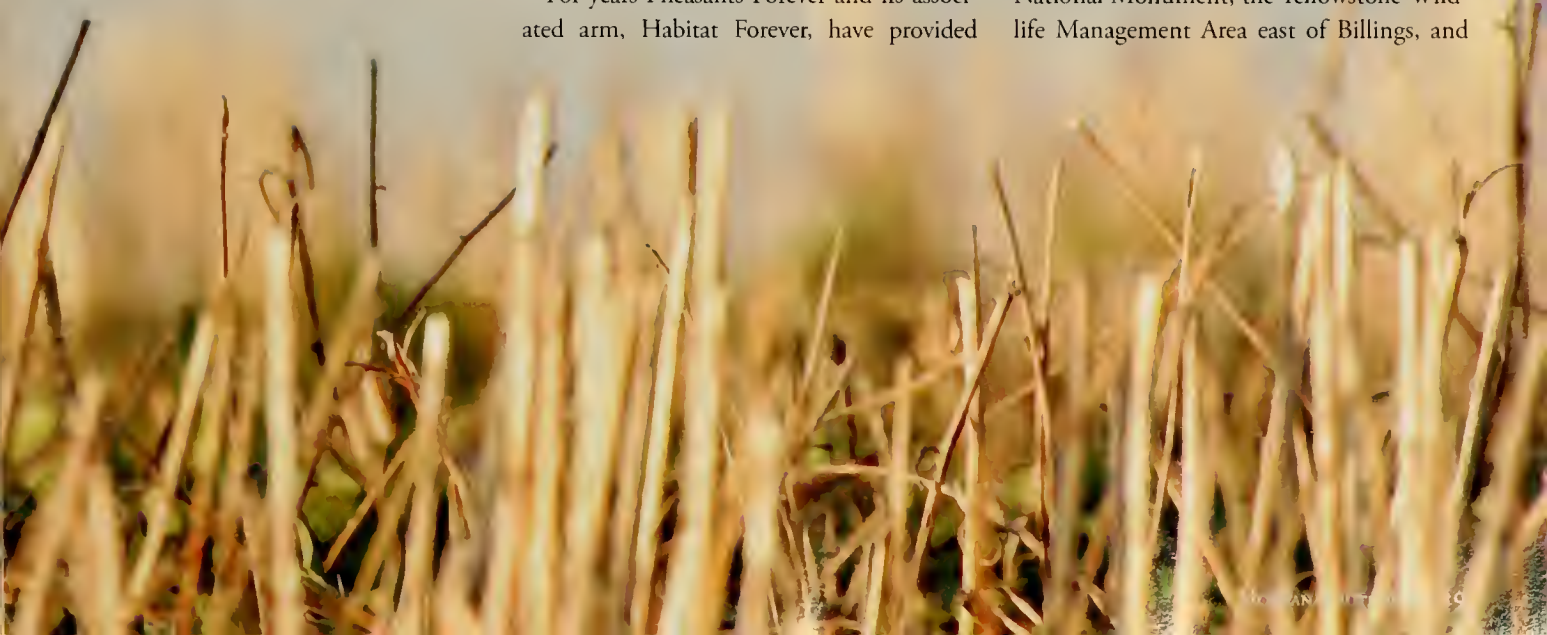
BY BOB GIBSON

Pheasant hunters in parts of south-central Montana will be in for a big surprise this season. “They’ll be seeing fields of standing corn and sorghum that will make them think they’re hunting in the Dakotas,” says Rick Northrup, statewide game bird coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Northrup is talking about winter food plots planted this past spring as part of a new cooperative project between a coalition of government agencies and a private conservation group.

For years Pheasants Forever and its associated arm, Habitat Forever, have provided

seed, expertise, and labor to Great Plains farmers who wanted to convert agricultural fields to upland game bird habitat. In Montana, the habitat enhancement has a new twist. An initiative—jointly funded by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Pheasants Forever—focuses exclusively on public land.

Last year, Pheasants Forever hired Dennis Yurian of Worden to farm three pieces of public land specifically for upland birds. The veteran Yellowstone County farmer worked former agricultural fields at Pompeys Pillar National Monument, the Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area east of Billings, and



the Sundance Lodge Special Recreation Management Area east of Laurel.

By summer, Yurian had converted 292 acres of former farm fields and river bottoms to vegetation specifically grown for pheasants and other upland birds. He planted 93 acres of winter food crops and 19 acres of rank grasses (dense nesting cover) to protect birds and their young from foul weather. He also hayed, mowed, applied herbicide, fertilized, and seeded an additional 161 acres that will become dense nesting cover and brood-rearing habitat. Currently he is in the early stages of converting another 19 acres of river bottoms into permanent wetlands, which provide essential winter cover for upland birds. Plans call for Yurian to improve habitat over the next three years on hundreds of additional acres scattered over six public sites in south-central Montana.

Matt O'Connor of Hopkinton, Iowa, oversees habitat teams, including the Montana project, for Pheasants Forever. The Montana effort, he says, is intended to build and improve habitat to attract and grow wild pheasants and other birds naturally. "The Yellowstone River Valley has a heck of a lot of potential," O'Connor says. "It has a tradition of public recreational use over the years. But without this unique partnership, we couldn't get anything done." The fact that all of the work is close to Billings—Montana's largest population center—is a bonus, he adds.

Under the five-year agreement, Yurian works for Pheasants Forever, but the BLM and FWP share most of the costs. Jay Parks, a wildlife biologist for the BLM's Billings field office, was instrumental in drafting plans and goals for the shared project. "The idea is that if you improve habitat, they will come," Parks says.

Parks expects the new habitat to attract waterfowl, turkeys, sharp-tailed grouse, deer, and songbirds and other nongame species as well as pheasants. "We want to benefit bird watching and nonconsumptive uses in addition to hunting," he says.

Pheasants Forever recently hired another habitat specialist for the Lewistown area, where clusters of public and private land

Bob Gibson manages the FWP Regional Information and Education Program in Billings.



GROWING GAME BIRDS Clockwise from top: Irrigated hay fields are reseeded to upland bird winter food plots and dense nesting cover at the Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area. Seeding a winter food plot for pheasants and other upland birds at the Sundance Lodge Special Recreation Management Area. Dennis Yurian, Pheasants Forever habitat specialist, adjusts center-pivot irrigation nozzles on an upland bird food plot at the Yellowstone WMA.



PHOTOS BY BOB GIBSON/MONTANA FWP

have "good upland potential," O'Connor says. O'Connor considers the cooperative project in the Yellowstone River Valley a success, even though the work has barely begun. "We have sportsmen talking about winter food, nesting cover, brood-rearing—about habitat for upland birds," he says. "In addition

to doing intensive habitat work, we have increased awareness." Northrup adds that those who have hunted Pompeys Pillar, Yellowstone WMA, and Sundance Lodge in the past are in for a big surprise this fall. "All I can say is that they might want to consider bringing along an extra box of shells." 🐾

Hungarian (gray) partridge

Perdix perdix By Dave Carty

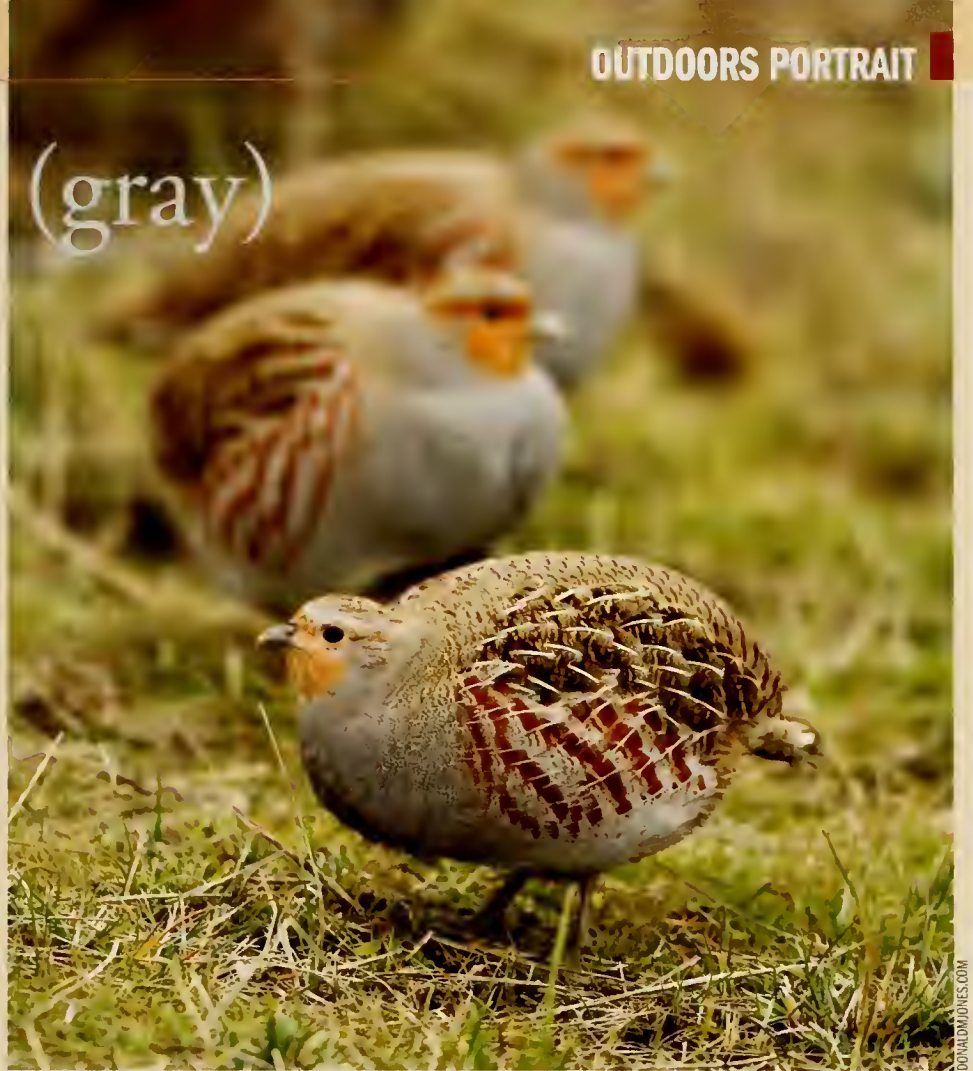
I'd just finished filling the empty tank in my aging pickup when I heard the unmistakable chirp of a Hungarian partridge, technically known as the gray partridge. It sounded like the rusty squeak of a gate hinge. But there weren't supposed to be Huns there—I was in the concrete bay of a busy gas station, which itself sat in the middle of a busy intersection. Asphalt radiated out from the place like spokes on a wheel. Somewhere out there in all that paved former prairie was a Hun, lonely and looking for a friend.

If there's anything characteristic about these ubiquitous Montana game birds, it's that they show up, often as not, precisely where you don't expect to see them. I've found coveys at 6,500 feet in the Absaroka Range and blithely flying over the Ford dealership in suburban Bozeman. About the only time I can't find Huns is when I'm specifically looking for them, with a shotgun in the crook of my arm and a pair of bird dogs quartering in front of me.

IDENTIFICATION

In the hand, Huns are easy to identify, though on the wing they're easy to confuse with chukars and sometimes sharp-tailed grouse. Handsome rusty-red face patches and tails are nearly identical on both males and females. Males have a slightly larger face patch than females and rusty-red shading on their wing shoulders. The distinct horseshoe-shaped red crescent on the Hun's breast is more common on males, but not exclusive to them, as many hunters believe. A better way to confirm sex is to check the feathers on the shoulders. A female has dark brown horizontal bars, while a male's are rust colored.

Dave Carty, of Bozeman, is a longtime contributor to Montana Outdoors.



RANGE

Though Huns are not native—they were imported here from Europe in the early 1900s—they thrive in much of Montana. Prime habitat in Montana is from the Rockies east and from Montana Highway 200 north, as well as in many mountain valleys in the western third of the state.

Huns are known as an “eruptive” species, which means there can be a lot one year and not many the next. (A cold, wet late June is deadly on chicks.) When populations are up, you can find Huns almost anywhere. When numbers are down, coveys retreat to prime habitat: agricultural land, ideally a grass and sagebrush mix interspersed with fields of wheat or barley. Lightly grazed rangeland can also hold good numbers of birds.

When the birds live in wheat country, their fall and winter diets may be almost exclusively wheat kernels and sprouts of volunteer wheat. In rangeland, they'll dine on grass and weed seeds, as well as the occasional grasshopper or other bug. Like most

upland bird chicks, young Huns need to eat abundant insects to grow.

COURTSHIP AND NESTING

By mid-February, Huns begin pairing up. The pairs nest in grasslands, sometimes near the borders of wheat fields, where the female lays a clutch of 16 to 18 eggs. The chicks—tiny yellow creatures no bigger than your thumb—are up and running by the end of June or early July. Huns are so secretive I don't start seeing family groups until August. By September, a typical covey will consist of the parents and chicks, with maybe a stray male or two they've picked up along the way. Covey size is typically around a dozen birds.

HUNTING

Huns are superb game birds. They hold well for a pointing dog, flush hard, and fly fast. But they aren't popular with many upland bird hunters, likely because the birds can be hard to find and often live in broken, hilly country where the walking is difficult. 🐾

PARTING SHOT

NOW WHERE ARE WE AGAIN?

Hunting season is here, and with it comes the challenge of finding property boundaries. Learn the language of land ownership on page 34. Photo by Denver Bryan.

